



“a tour de force”

Paul L. Moorcraft

Chris Cocks

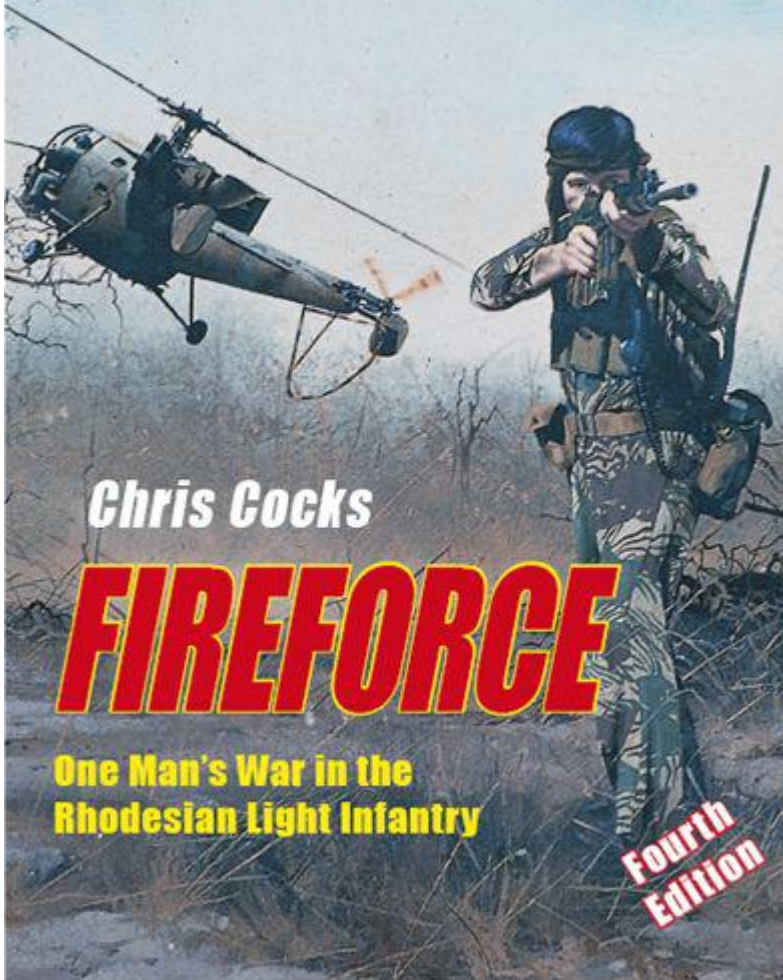
FIREFORCE

**One Man's War in the
Rhodesian Light Infantry**

**Fourth
Edition**

“a tour de force”

Paul L. Moorcraft



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**One Man's War in the
Rhodesian Light Infantry**

**Fourth
Edition**

Telephone : 707451

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Causeway. 8/2/77

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No 728352 Rank TPR Name COCKS C.M.
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for kitting.
He will/will not require accommodation.
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CERTIFICATE OF QUALIFICATION

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT:

TPR COCKS C.M. 728352

QUALIFIED AS A PARACHUTIST

AT NEW SARUM

COURSE NUMBER 23/1/77 - 11/2/77 67

DATES 23/1/77 - 11/2/77

Rh.AF INSTRUCTOR COLOUR SGT. WHITE

SIGNED

C/S Peter White

TIKU

FIREFORCE

One Man's War
in the
Rhodesian Light Infantry

Chris Cocks



By the same author:

Survival Course

Cyclone Blues

The Saints—The Rhodesian Light Infantry

PRINT ISBN 9780958489096

EPUB ISBN: 9781908916815

eBook co-published in 2012 by:

Helion & Company Limited

26 Willow Road

Solihull

West Midlands

B91 1UE

England

Tel. 0121 705 3393

Fax 0121 711 4075

email: info@helion.co.uk

website: www.helion.co.uk

and

30° South Publishers (Pty) Ltd.

16 Ivy Road

Pinetown 3610

South Africa

email: info@30degreessouth.co.za

website: www.30degreessouth.co.za

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Cover painting by Craig Bone

Design and origination by Pointset, McManus & Dando, Randburg, 1997

Maps by Richard Wood

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*This book is dedicated in loving memory to my two friends who were killed
in action*

SERGEANT HUGH McCALL

and

LANCE CORPORAL PETE GARNETT

They were there and are with me now

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to:

The editors of 'Cheetah,' the no longer extant RLI magazine for the excerpts I have used. 'Scope', for the extract in the Epitaph.

The Rhodesia Herald for the three articles I have included.

Charlie Norris for his unflagging support and for gathering photographs and material.

Tom Argylle for the loan of his wonderful collection of photographs, many of which I have included in the book. And also for his enthusiasm and *joie de vivre* – even after losing a leg in a freak hunting accident.

Claude Botha, Mike MacGeorge, Mike Orylski, Keith Holshausen, Craig Fourie, Lome Knox, Ian Cuthbertson, The Rhodesia Herald and particularly Tony Coom and Steve Prowse for photographic material. Some pictures are unacknowledged although the publishers have made every effort to establish the authorship. For this, the publishers apologise and will be glad to amend or add credits in subsequent editions.

Geoff Higgs for the superb sketches.

Dr Richard Wood for the map.

Rod Smith.

Paul Moorcraft

John Coleman in Colorado.

Sue Evans and Lt. Col. David Wilson in Australia.

Craig Bone for the cover artwork.

John Connelly, who was tragically killed in a motorcycle crash in 1994.

Paul Abbott for being alive.

and especially to Jacky for retyping the manuscript.

EXTRACTS

from the RLI magazine 'Cheetah', 1978.

In 1960 it was decided for the first time to include a regular European (white) Battalion in the Army order of battle and as a result No. 1 Training Unit was established at Brady Barracks, Bulawayo. No. 1 Training Unit not only provided personnel for the Battalion, which was formed later, but also provided personnel for C Squadron, the Special Air Service and the Selous Scouts, a reconnaissance squadron.

The 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, was officially formed on 1st February 1961. This is now recognised as the Regimental Birthday.

In the latter part of 1961, the Battalion moved from Bulawayo to the new barracks in Salisbury, Cranbome Barracks, having just returned from operations on the Northern Rhodesia-Congo border.

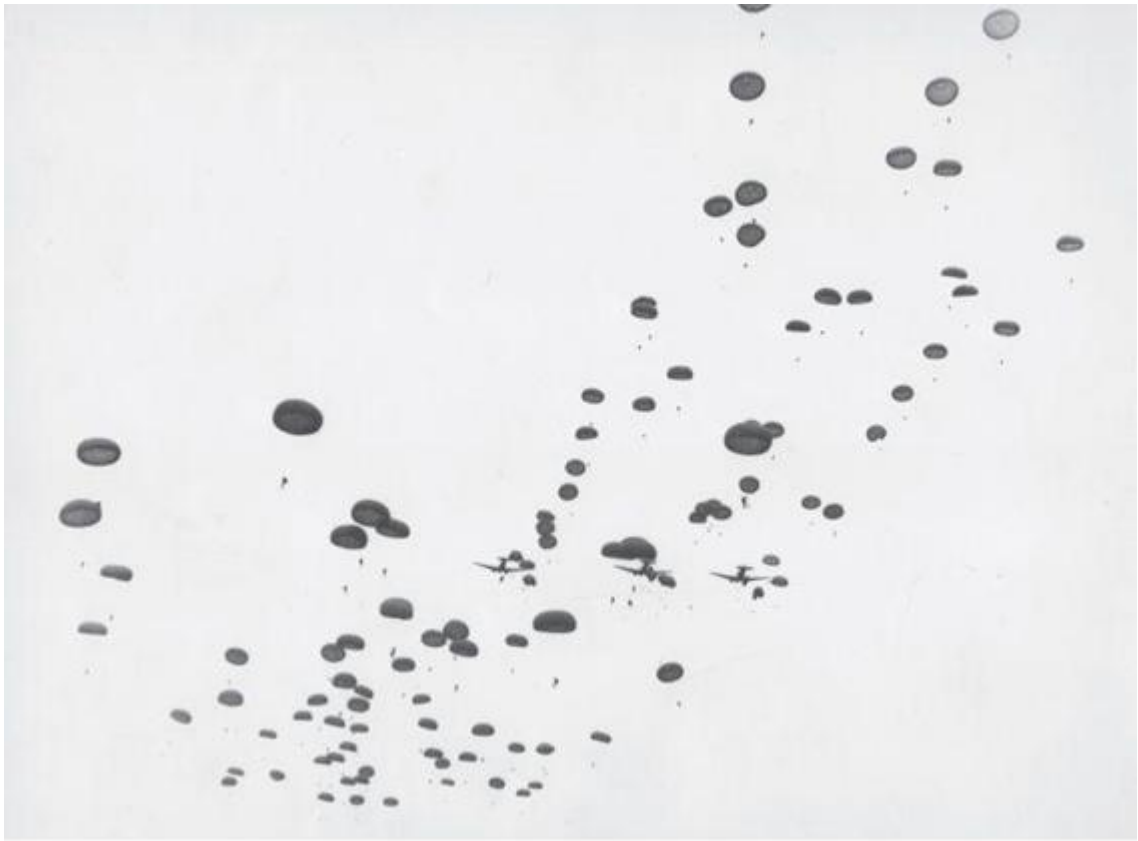
In 1964 the organisation and role of the Battalion was changed from the conventional infantry unit to a Commando Battalion, The wearing of the green beret was also introduced.

Colours were presented to the Battalion on 19th June 1963 by the then Governor, Sir Humphrey Gibbs, K.C.M.C., O.B.E., on behalf of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

On 27th June 1970, the Regimental Colour was trooped before the Prime Minister, The Honourable I.D. Smith.

Regimental traditions which form an important part of Battalion life, are quickly being built up. Two are noteworthy, namely the Regimental Quick March, "The Saints," and the mascot – the Cheetah.

For the past few years the Battalion has borne the brunt of border control operations against terrorist gangs that have infiltrated into Rhodesia.



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FOREWORD

The horror of guerrilla warfare in Africa...

Fireforce is the compelling, brutal but true account of Chris Cocks' service in 3 Commando, *The Rhodesian Light Infantry*, during the bush war.

Serving in 3 Commando's elite ranks, other than born Rhodesians were *Englishmen, Irishmen, Scots, Welshmen, Americans, Norwegians, South Africans, Portuguese, Brazilians, Australians, New Zealanders, West Germans and Canadians*, plus a host of other nationalities.

It was the closest parallel to the French Foreign Legion in recent times.

Chris Cocks joined the RLI as a National Serviceman in 1976 for 12 months at the age of 18, then signed on as a regular for three years. He soon became a stick leader and at times, after promotion to lance corporal, acted as Troop Commander. His upbringing had been a sheltered one and he knew little of life... but he was due for a radical change.

Fireforce, a method of combat developed by the Rhodesians and perfected by the RLI, involved troops being helicoptered or parachuted into an area immediately after a guerrilla presence had been reported or a sighting made.

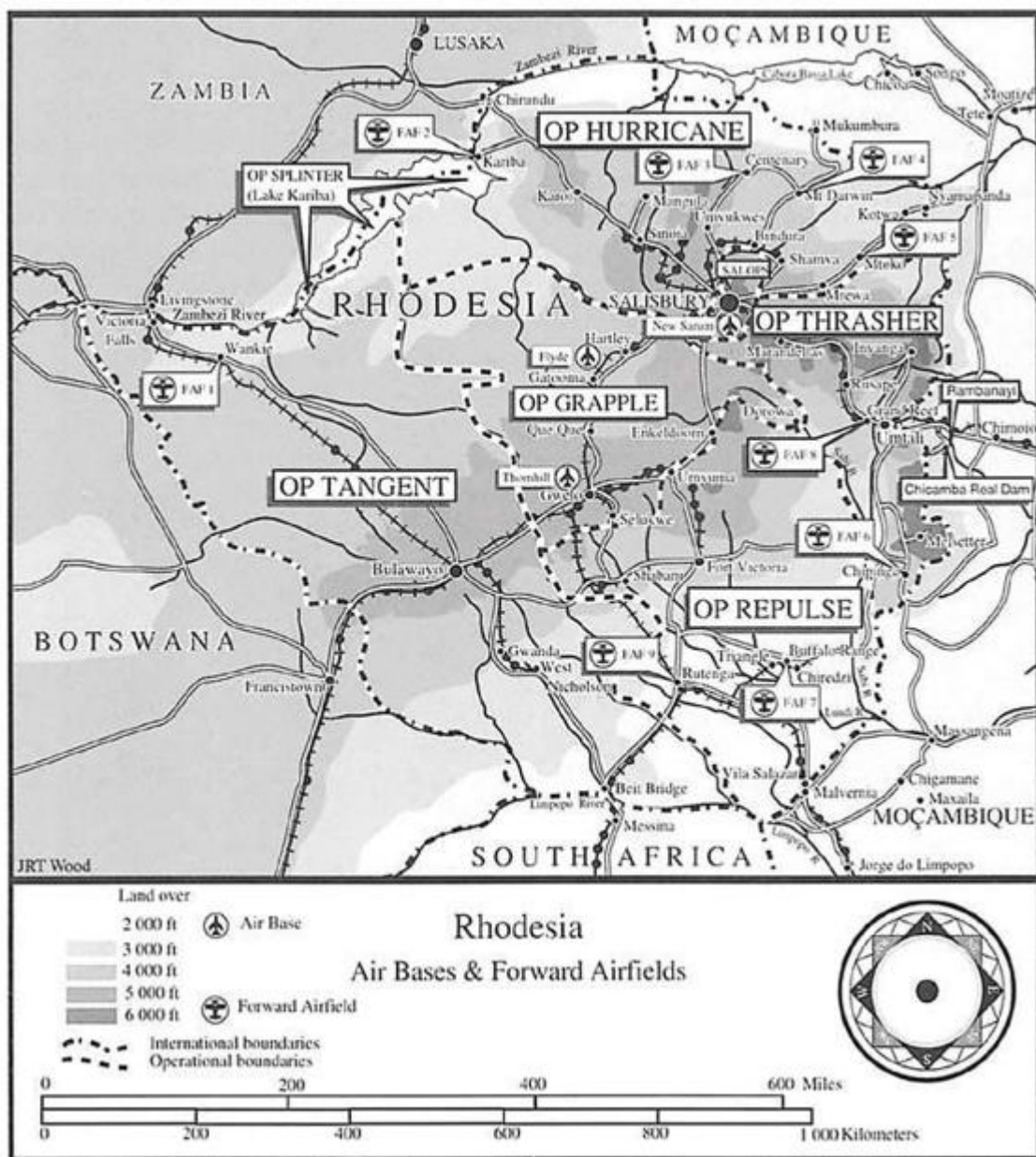
The combat strain on a fighting soldier was almost unbelievable, for the Rhodesians, who were always desperately short of ground troops to deal with guerrilla incursions, sometimes parachuted the same men into as many as three contacts a day.

While estimates of enemy casualties vary, there seems little doubt that the RLI successfully accounted for at least 12,000 ZANLA and ZIPRA Communist-trained and equipped guerrillas during the long years of war.

Fireforce is not for the squeamish. Although it has been written with an unforgettable pathos and humour, it tells of face-to-face combat in the bush and death at point blank range. It is a book which does nothing to glamorise or glorify war. For as Chris Cocks found at such a young age, war is merely a catalogue of suffering, destruction and death.

Fireforce has been described by critics as being to the Rhodesian War what *All Quiet On The Western Front* was to World War I.

Read it... it will be an experience you will never forget.





BOOK ONE

AN ORDEAL AHEAD



PROLOGUE

Harare, Zimbabwe, Monday 30th June 1986

It was a chilly morning in Harare. The young psychologist was looking at my fingernails as he spoke. I subconsciously tried to cover them up as I have the bad habit of biting them.

He'll make something out of that, I don't doubt, I thought.

'Drinking is not a problem unless it is used to solve a problem.'

I considered and digested this information and finally decided it must be true.

I had for the last few years been drinking and smoking far too heavily and I took no exercise. I didn't tell him this.

'You are intelligent and you are using drink as a solution for your boredom and frustration.'

I reflected on this and decided this was also true.

'You would have been ideally suited to law, but because of present circumstances I suggest you take some sort of commercial degree.'

He certainly made sense.

'Don't think it's just you,' he continued, 'there are a lot of people from your era who are completely without direction. You're from a lost generation.' Right again.

The memories of some of my contemporaries flashed through my mind....

Malcolm Nicholson, who blew his brains out in Durban.

One-eyed Neville Harding, drowned in his own vomit.

Bob Smith, who died of cancer.

Carl Oosterhuizen, who shot himself in the head in Cape Town.

Frank Neave, electrocuted by a swimming pool pump.

Marius Marais, killed in a car accident.

Trevor Schoultz, shot in the head and now all these years later might have to have his arm amputated.

Goss Condon, who had just spent eight months in a Spanish gaol for drug smuggling.

Roger England, sentenced to death for his part in the abortive Seychelles coup but later reprieved.

The list was endless.

Some joined the South African Defence Force and a few are still there.

Some joined the British Army and one or two fought in the Falklands.
A few serve as instructors and bodyguards in Arab armies.

Some have gone religious, some are in civvy street, some successful,
some just drifting.

‘From the results of the test,’ the psychologist continued, ‘I see you
have a strong leaning towards expression. You could have been a journalist
or even an author.’

Author?

Five years ago I started wilting down some of my experiences, but as
with other things the efforts petered out and my writings had since sat in the
back of a dark cupboard.

The interview drew to a close. We both rose and shook hands.

I was shown outside and I walked out into the chilly June air.



CHAPTER 1

Basic Training

M

y call-up papers ordered that I present myself to the Rhodesian Light Infantry Barracks at Cranbome in Salisbury, on the 8th January 1976 at 0800hrs.

My mother dropped me off at the impressive gates of the barracks and kissed me goodbye. It would be six weeks before I saw the outside of those gates again.

I looked in awe at the sentry boxes and the smart RPs (Regimental Policemen) with their white peaked hats and armbands, as with distinct trepidation I walked through clutching my suitcase.

There were RPs and instructors everywhere, marshalling us new recruits into squads of about sixty, after which we stood in rows of three, silently waiting.

Then a corporal in camouflage uniform with a green beret and RLI stable belt appeared.

‘Okay, you lot, let’s see if you can march. By the right... Oui-ick march. Leftrightleft-rightleftright...’

With no idea where we were going we stumbled forward, anxiously trying to keep step, and I glanced around at my companions. Finding I didn’t know anyone I felt very alone.

Like me, everyone wore civilian clothes and had short haircuts. I had only had my haircut the previous day, having ignored all advice to have it done earlier to allow my neck a chance to accustom itself to the harsh rays of the tropical sun. That was a mistake I would pay dearly for in the next few days.

We halted without any precision and shuffled our feet.

‘Stand still.’ our corporal bawled. Then, ‘Right, fall in at the end of the line.’

We had arrived at a barrack block. It had three storeys in sterile, sixties-style, face-brick architecture and in front of the building was a covered veranda, the floor of which shone like a mirror.

In front of it was a tarmac apron upon which was a long queue of recruits similar to ourselves, all waiting to reach the veranda, where they were confronted by a series of desks with officers and sergeants sitting behind.

I and the rest of my squad joined the back of the line. We were permitted to smoke and we could talk, but I knew no one so I just listened. I gathered from the conversation that this was where we were to be signed on and issued with pay-books.

The queue moved forward at a snail's pace. There must have been over three hundred of us there already and more new recruits kept arriving.

Suddenly I noticed one recruit, a darkish young man with a proud nose and athletic build standing in a beautifully kept flower bed.

Even my civilian mind wondered if this was not a dangerous practice, and sure enough from somewhere a furious voice bellowed. 'You – get out of my fucking flower bed!... Come here, you little cunt!'

As the unfortunate culprit stepped forward I identified the owner of the terrifying voice as a large, immensely powerful-looking man who did not appeal to have a neck. His head merged imperceptibly into his ox-like body. There was a red sash slung diagonally over his uniform (like a waiter I thought) and he carried a big black stick which I later learned he called his 'pace stick'. It transpired his name was Sergeant Major Erasmus and that he was known as 'Moose'.

As time progressed we would see him perform amazing feats with this stick, or its replacements, which in moments of rage he frequently broke over the shoulders of some luckless recruit.

'What's your name?' he now bawled at the recruit.

'Condon,' came the timid reply.

Rage suffused the sergeant major's already terrifying face. Condon had not addressed him as 'sir', and I thought the veins in his almost non-existent neck were about to burst as he howled not more than six inches from Condon's white face, 'You nasty little piece of dog turd!... SAH! You call me SAH, do you understand?'

I thought Condon's eardrums were almost certain to burst. As I had no desire to be the next object of the sergeant major's wrath I kept my face as

impassive as I could.

Moose yelled, 'Now fuck off out of my sight, before I fucking kill you!' and watched, glowering, as Condon fled back to his place in the ranks.

After some three hours of waiting I arrived at the front of the queue and one of the bored and by now ill-tempered NCOs issued me with my pay-book.

'Number?' one of them shouted in my direction.

'108343, sir,' I replied promptly. We'd all made a point of memorising our numbers. Though still very nervous I felt rather pleased with myself.

'Don't call me sir... I'm a sergeant'

'Yes, sir.'

'Oh... piss off man.'

Deflated, I realised I had much to learn. I also suspected that it was likely to be a painful process... I was not proved wrong.

After receiving our pay-books we were formed into a squad of sixty and double-marched over to the Quartermaster's Stores. There we were issued with various articles of kit, such as blankets and eating utensils.

'They are not called knives and forks,' explained the corporal who handed them to us. 'They are called grazing irons – do you understand?'

Yes, corporal,' came our hesitant reply.

What?' he shouted. 'I can't hear you.'

'Yes, Corporal,' we muttered more loudly.

'I still can't hear you.'

Feeling embarrassed we bawled, 'YES, CORPORAL.

'I CAN'T HEAR YOU!'

This continued for over ten minutes, all of us red in the face and shouting until we felt as if our lungs would burst, before the corporal appeared satisfied and allowed us to be bundled into trucks and driven to the Brigade QM stores. Here we were issued with uniforms and even more kit.

Then we were made to run back to barracks, carrying what by now had become mountains of kit – our blankets, pillow, webbing and uniforms, plus our suitcases from civvy street which contained clothes and other more valuable items. These included not only toothpaste and razor blades but also indispensable tins of Kiwi boot polish... By army standards Kiwi polish was far superior to any other brand of boot polish.

I felt sorry for the recruits on that run who were wearing the platform-soled shoes that were in fashion at the time. Thinking about the razor blades I laughed inwardly – no doubt the army would make us shave every day, despite the fact that once a week would have been more than enough for most of us.

By this time we had missed lunch, but as I wasn't feeling hungry anyway I didn't mind. The corporal took us to a large hall where mattresses were strewn over the floor. We each laid claim to one of them, and as we thankfully deposited our kit a lance corporal shouted, 'Fall in in ten minutes with your grazing irons'. It didn't take me long to realise that 'Fall in' was army-speak for 'Get together in a bunch'.

Good – there was time for a quick cigarette.

I had found an old school friend, Tom Small, and we got talking. He had a brother in the Engineers and wanted a posting there because he didn't fancy the idea of being an infantry soldier. Tom managed to wangle a transfer a few days later and I only saw him once more. That was just before he was killed in a landmine explosion three years later.

There was barely time to finish our cigarettes before we fell in and doubled up to the 'graze hall'. Here once again we joined a long queue and waited a seeming age to gobble down a supper which was good but insufficient.

After dinner we were marched back to our billets – marched, not doubled, because the instructors were not supposed to make us run on full stomachs. Later we found that this eminently sensible rule was amazingly flexible. It depended on the mood of the instructors.

I discovered our billets (army-speak for bedroom/dormitory) were only temporary. There were over five hundred recruits and things were still chaotic. Some recruits were to be posted to other units, but until that happened the administration was under truly tremendous pressure.

The corporal said that 'lights out' was at 2100hrs. and advised us to start organising our kit. When Tom showed me the things I should begin with and what needed shining, the list seemed endless. He had picked up a lot of tips from his elder brother. Stick belt with brass buckle... black bayonet frog... black stick boots... brown combat boots... two rifle slings, one black and one white. And I learned that our mess tins had to shine like mirrors, as did the dixies, the grazing irons, the tin mug and the safety razor.

Cut off all loose threads from the brand-new uniforms or else you'll be charged for being 'gungy'.

Sew on your badges – Rhodesian Army badge on the right sleeve and the 2-Brigade insignia on the left.

Which is which?.....Are you sure?.....What's 2-Brigade?

With a new tin of Brasso sitting next to me I started on a mess tin, but by the time the lights went out the confounded thing didn't even remotely resemble a minor.

In the barrack room's alien darkness, surrounded by the snores of recruits who obviously were a lot more phlegmatic than I was, I lay awake for a long time nervously contemplating the enormity of what lay ahead of me.

The following few days were similar to the first. Everything seemed disorganised, and still wearing our civilian clothes, we spent most of our time doubling around the camp .

We were rushed from one place to another, signing papers, collecting more kit, having medical checks and, finally, taking the Oath of Allegiance to Rhodesia.

I was dreading the medical examination. I have atrociously flat feet and knew I should by rights be graded as 'S' category.

All recruits classified in the 'S' and 'B' categories were immediately posted to Llewellyn Barracks in far-away Bulawayo, there to be trained as clerks or military policemen. I never fully understood what the 'S' stood for – only that it was definitely not a good category... And what had happened to categories 'C through to 'R'?

But fortunately for me, due to the large volume of recruits the examination was not as thorough as it might have been and I was put in an 'A category. I was delighted that because of this grading I had not been sent away from Salisbury, my home town. Nevertheless, throughout our subsequent training my flat feet caused me endless pain and worry. I suffered for it in the long run.

Initially discipline was bearable and we wondered when it would become harsher. We surmised it would be after being allocated to our squads when training had started in earnest.

On the fifth day I volunteered to attend an officers' selection board and was put through various tests. They were both mental and physical and I

found all of them relatively simple.

Two days later the results were announced. I had failed.

Although I had passed all the tests I was told I was not leadership material. That I didn't have the bearing and self-confidence to be an officer.

Screw them, I thought bitterly. I only failed because I wasn't loud and abrasive like the sods who did get through.

Life is funny like that.

Those first few confusing days were to shape my military career... and probably the rest of my life as well. What would have become of me had I been deemed officer material? Where would I have ended up if they had noticed my flat feet and I had failed my medical? Comrades who were killed or wounded would have been mere names to me. Just as fellows in other Rhodesian units, or even in armies elsewhere, are mere names to me now.

Life is a series of crossroads too.

I had not volunteered for the army. A year's national service seemed an awful long time for a boy of eighteen and at one stage I was determined to evade it.

I knew little of politics. But my parents used to vote against Ian Smith and his Rhodesian Front, and I had been to a multiracial private school where I had grown up with blacks and felt it unjust that they were not allowed to represent the school at sports when we were competing against whites-only government schools.

Some blacks were my good friends and in my youthful mind I appreciated vaguely that something had to be radically wrong with the policies of the Rhodesian Front. Yet, I still went and fought for the green and white flag of Rhodesia... and I was certainly no patriot.

I still cannot understand it... even to this day.

Perhaps it was peer pressure – or fear of shaming my family – or perhaps even a lack of courage to desert.

I had everything planned. I had secretly obtained a visa for Moçambique, which in 1976 still maintained reasonably friendly ties with Rhodesia – but not so close as to repatriate deserters as was the case with South Africa.

In December 1975 I was going on holiday to Port Elizabeth in South Africa, to visit my grandmother. On the return journey I planned to jump

train in Johannesburg and make my way to Lourenço Marques in Moçambique. Once there I would find employment as a merchant seaman and go where the wind took me. It all seemed very romantic.

I hadn't intended to tell my sisters who were travelling with me. But as we neared Johannesburg I changed my mind. I felt I had to say goodbye. They were utterly shocked – not so much for national honour but for the shame it would bring to our parents – and through pleading, cajoling, crying and sound 'common sense' they persuaded me against it.

And so reluctantly I continued on the journey back to Salisbury. I had lost my chance.

I have often wondered since that day if I was foolish to listen to them.

Many young men deserted from the Rhodesian Army, often actively assisted by their parents and others left the country under the auspices of furthering their education. In many cases they had wealthy and influential parents. When the war ended a large percentage of them returned to what was by then Zimbabwe in order to establish flourishing careers.

Oh well, *c'est la vie*.

But for now I had found a home. Though just an austere and cold barrack block, for the next twenty-one weeks it would be a place of refuge for me, a place for relaxing and sleeping.

The block contained twelve beds and I asked the recruits already inside if there was room for one more. There was. I recognised Condon who had been shouted at by 'Moose', the ox-like sergeant major.

The bed next to mine was occupied by a short, dark, bespectacled fellow called Gavin Fletcher whom I had known in civilian life. It gave me a great feeling of security to know someone... even if only vaguely.

Gavin's parents had been ambushed and killed by guerrillas in the Centenary farming district a couple of years before. He naturally was bitter and couldn't wait to see action and have a chance to avenge his parents' death.

The recruits were friendly and there was an air of somewhat hectic excitement in the room. I think perhaps it was mostly bravado... an effort to mask their feelings of insecurity and foreboding.

As our training started in earnest life began to assume some semblance of order – at least we knew vaguely what the days ahead held for us. There was an ominous air of reassurance in the prospect of routine.

We were always hungry and we were always tired. Many were the times we fell asleep during lectures in spite of threats of dire punishments. Sometimes a man was caught nodding off and then the entire squad was punished with extra drill or PT.

The instructors used basic but effective methods. One was that if a recruit did something wrong, the entire squad would administer its own form of justice on the unfortunate – which was usually a black eye or two.

We never liked this as it gave the instructors a feeling of we felt perverted satisfaction. They preferred it because it saved them from charging the offender, which was a clumsy process and involved a lot of effort and paperwork on their part. Or maybe it was all part of enforced teamwork

Our day started at about 0400hrs. – time for us to prepare for daily inspection until roll call and PT at 0600hrs. The first PT of the day consisted of a short run and basic exercise only. Then came breakfast, which had to be gulped down quickly so we could be ready for the daily inspection.

Our barrack room was part of Base Group and was situated a long way from Training Troop. We were billeted there because Training Troop had exhausted all its accommodation due to the large intake.

For daily inspection our kit had to be spotless and laid out on beds in precisely the same pattern as the rest of the squad. This could be frustrating as occasionally another barrack room might decide to change the order slightly without informing us – maybe the position of a knife, or something else of comparatively minor importance... and the instructors who had eyes like hawks rarely missed a mistake, inadvertent or not.

After inspection we changed into drill order, and dressing was a painful and involved process as we had to look perfect. No creases in the shirt, the alignment of the shirt buttons, belt buckles and fly-buttons all to be precisely identical and correct. Garters had to be exactly the same height, laces without twists, all loose threads cut from uniforms, and boots shining like mirrors. And finally, it was deemed a heinous offence to wear non-military underwear.

Once dressed we doubled gingerly to Training Troop. This was where we were inspected, and if the instructor so wished it was easy to find fault... no matter how perfectly one might have dressed.

Before muster parade our personal turnout and barrack rooms were inspected, usually by our squad instructor, Sergeant Larrett, or by Corporal Locke (later killed in action) or ruddy-faced Lance Corporal Wentink.

They were bad enough with their liberal distribution of charges, but on Fridays we faced the black wrath of Captain Cooper, a dour-faced man who never smiled... Worse still, it could be the rage of Moose Erasmus, the neckless Company Sergeant Major.

I was rarely less than petrified and those inspections remain indelibly stamped on my memory.

Sergeant Larrett or Corporal Locke would appear at the door with stony faces and glare at us ominously.

Then would come the scream, 'Barrack Room, Barrack Room-SHUN!' and our boots would crash together in unison on the brilliantly polished floor as we came smartly to attention.

In my mind's eye I can still see Moose slowly passing down the aisle between the beds, minutely examining each recruit in turn. I would stare rigidly to my front, listening to the hated footsteps approaching, then Moose's feared voice growling at Otten, the recruit next to me.

Otten was a volunteer and only sixteen, and Moose would invariably find fault with him.

'Sergeant,' he would rave to Larrett, 'this man looks like a sack of potatoes tied up in the middle. He's a fucking animal... He's fucking gungy. Charge him!'

Then the footsteps would methodically move on and stop in front of me.

I tried not to tremble as I shouted out my number, rank and name.

The CSM glanced critically over me, then at my kit neatly laid out on the bed.

His look showed nothing less than disgust. Was he trying to look into my soul? But he said nothing and seconds that seemed like hours later he grunted with derision and moved on, anticipating his next victim like a lion going for its kill.

Fletcher was next and, unfortunately for him, he had a tiny feather clinging to his shirt. It must have inadvertently escaped from his pillow. No matter how hard they might try, some fellows could never get their dress just right – always Otten and Fletcher.

Moose spotted it instantly.

His great frame bore down on little Fletcher, his bloodshot eyes a few centimetres away from the youngster's glasses.

'Do you know you have a feather on your uniform, soldier?' he growled.

'No, sir,' shouted Fletcher, visibly quaking as a shower of spittle clouded his lenses.

'Are you calling me a liar?... Are you?'

'No, sir.'

'Sergeant, come here,' Moose ordered.

But Sergeant Larrett was already there, his pen poised above his notebook

Moose again concentrated on Fletcher.

'You disgusting little beast, you've been fucking chickens haven't you? Sergeant, charge this man. He's a filthy, little, snivelling chicken fucker!'

His anguish seemed quite genuine and as if personally insulted he moved on to the man next in line. We heaved a united sigh of relief when eventually the giant sergeant major padded scowling from the barrack room.

Five minutes later, dressed in combat kit and webbing, we fell in in front of Training Troop ready for weapon training.

As time passed we became familiar with all the weapons we could possibly encounter in the commandos, including those used by the enemy. We were taught, then re-taught how to strip and re-assemble a rifle, what its rate of fire was, its velocity, its characteristics, its function, action on stoppages, how to carry it and how to fire it.

'Right' our corporal would say, 'give me the nine characteristics of the FN.' We would all try to appear invisible as he looked around for a recruit who had not been paying sufficient attention.

'Scott,' he snapped, and the rest of us instantly relaxed.

'Umm... the FN is a high velocity gun that...' Scott broke off abruptly, realising his mistake.

An FN is not a gun but a rifle, and to call it by any other name was a serious offence... We'd been told we must treat our FN as we would a wife – even to the extent of being prepared to make love to it. My mind boggled.

Thirty seconds later we were doubling around the infernal grenade wall.

The wall was about four hundred metres from the instruction area and we got to double around it so many times each day that I soon lost count. It was the instructors' favourite means of punishment.

Out of the blue the sergeant would suddenly order us to stand up. Someone had done something wrong and we knew what was coming.

'Right,' he would say, 'when I say 'go' I want to see the last man around the grenade wall.'

We would wait in anticipation.

'Move,' he barked, and many of the recruits dashed frenziedly away .

'Stand still!' he yelled. 'I didn't say go.'

Looking sheepish the recruits returned and the grinning sergeant said, 'Right, you have one minute to be back here... Now – GO!'

As we galloped off I tried to gauge the speed of the leaders.

I had quickly learned that in the army you must never be more than just average. If you were constantly amongst the front-runners the instructors remembered and would call you out when they needed a demonstration mannequin... On the other hand it was suicidal to be the last as the instructors would remember you for that as well. I was learning.

I don't believe we were ever timed as we ran around the grenade wall. It was very difficult to finish the run in less than a couple of minutes, and more often than not we had to go around the hateful thing again anyway.

Every morning we had to drill for sometimes up to four hours and this for me was pure torture.

Besides the pain in my feet which became excruciating, my pale exposed neck suffered agony from sunburn. Our combat caps had a flap at the back designed to protect our necks from the heat of the sun. But during training we were not allowed to lower them and within a few days my neck became a mass of suppurating sores.

Unsympathetic insults rained down on me from the instructors.

I was a pig!

I was gungy!

Worst of all I was damaging government property... a serious crime which nearly got me charged.

Eventually they relented and allowed me to wear the flap down, but the damage was done and I spent many sleepless nights lying face down to stop the blood and pus saturating my pillow. When I woke up however, the pillow would still look like a used field dressing.

This caused me more worry than physical pain, as the pillow had to be laid out for inspection every morning. Luckily no one ever turned it over and saw the mess otherwise my punishment would have been severe.

We marched many hundreds of kilometres over that parade ground and stood for many hours in the heat of the sweltering sun, and the instructors' ability to shout and scream at us for hours on end never ceased to amaze me.

On Fridays it was the turn of Captain Cooper or CSM Moose to take the inspection on the parade ground. Mostly it was the CSM.

The numerous squads marched on and lined up at the back of the square, waiting for Moose to make his grand appearance.

The most senior squads formed up on the left and us rookies on the right.

Then Moose barked some unintelligible word of command and the whole parade marched forward the regulation fifteen paces to get 'on parade'.

It is difficult to keep your dressing in a line of some two hundred recruits and more often than not during those first few weeks of training the whole operation ended in total disaster.

Moose would immediately shout and rant and tell us how useless we were... And we really did feel useless.

But somehow the seeds of pride had begun to slowly sprout within us.

When the parade was settled Moose inspected us in a carbon copy of the inspection in the barrack room. This time though, he arranged for the Regimental Police to be standing by on the edge of the parade ground, ready to march wrong-doers directly off to the cells where they could spend a day or two contemplating their crimes.

Before being charged the unfortunates were roughly treated by the RPs, even if the charge itself was not always too serious. It depended on what you were charged with.

Most charges came under Section 39 which encompassed virtually every misdemeanour. Not shaving properly, for example, came under this section, and sometimes even this could be deemed a serious offence and the culprit would find himself with fourteen days CB.

Although this might sound ridiculous – for during basic training we were all confined to barracks anyway – the sentence was more sinister than it sounds. The offending recruit was required to report to the guardroom

every half hour after 1800hrs., for sometimes up to six or seven hours depending on the whim of the RPs... and as the guardroom was over two kilometres from our barrack room the hapless recruit could spend virtually the whole night running back and forth.

He was also required to change dress each time he reported. Sometimes it was drill order, sometimes it was combat kit – with or without webbing, and at other times it would be PT kit.

We were united against the common enemy and would lay out all his kit and help him dress in whatever dress order was required. But even so the recruit would arrive back breathlessly at the barrack room.

The irony of the whole situation was that he could be charged again by the RPs if he did not arrive on time, or was less than immaculately dressed. And as it was almost impossible to run the two kilometres to the guardroom and still appear faultless, it was a vicious circle.

If during the day we had particularly displeased our instructors we would be put on ‘change parades.’ Then the entire squad would be put on the equivalent of CB. This had slightly more variation though, in that we also did punishment PT.

In the centre of the barracks was a large circular tract of land where the battalion chapel was situated and, later on, a bronze statue of an RLI trooper erected as a memorial to the fallen.

This was ‘holy ground’ that only trained commandos would dare to cross, so during change parades we had to run around the infernal circle many times. The only break we enjoyed was when we were changing dress order, and that was only for a minute or two.

Carrying gigantic logs up and down the playing fields was another agony and every muscle in one’s body screamed in pain.

I remember the bliss of fainting once. Fortunately the instructor was not feeling particularly vindictive that day and did not make my comrades carry me as was usually the case when a recruit collapsed.

When on change parades we were only given a reprieve well after midnight. Then, unbeaten, we stumbled back to our billets where we would collapse into deep and dreamless slumbers.

‘I wonder what it’s like in the bush?’ we sometimes asked ourselves.

‘I scheme it must be lekker,’ Brown would say. ‘At least you don’t have to put up with any of this bullshit!’

He was right in a way, but we didn't realise then that the instructors were only trying to prepare us for the far worse ordeal that lay ahead. Our minds were being mechanised.

At the time though it all seemed unreal, in some ways a bit of a game, if admittedly a tiling and brutal one. War seemed far away... something in which other people were involved.

We'd heard many stories of troops in the commandos being killed, but we could not relate it to ourselves. It would never happen to us.

The first phase of our training was about to finish. I had been a soldier for six weeks and it seemed like eternity. Once this initial phase was over we would start to specialise in the various fields to which the army felt each of us would be best suited.

Some of the recruits were posted to other units such as the Armoured Car Regiment, the Signals Corps, Engineers or Artillery, or to administrative posts.

However the majority of us chose to remain and try to pass out in the RLI and we only lost one man from our barrack room, Charlton who was exuberant when he left to do an MA3 medics course.

We woke up one morning feeling very excited. It was the very first time we were eligible for a weekend pass... naturally depending on how well we did with our inspections and drill tests.

Moose and Captain Cooper were the adjudicators and although it didn't look as if our chances were too good we managed to pass the inspection without anyone being charged... But the drill was another kettle of fish.

All the other squads seemed so good.

Blue Squad was exceptionally competent. They had perfected all kinds of intricate movements which we could never hope to emulate.

We waited in nervous anticipation for the command to march on to the square.

'By the right... qui-ick march,' shouted Sergeant Larrett.

He seemed just as anxious for us to pass as we were.

Perhaps the bastard really did care after all!

Our performance was far from ideal, but in spite of this Sergeant Larrett came into the barrack room and told us to collect our passes from the Orderly Room. We were ecstatic.

Many of the recruits started boasting about how many girls they intended laying and I felt envious and inadequate. I didn't even have a girlfriend and they truly seemed to be men of the world to me.

My boarding school background had not allowed me much opportunity to meet girls, but at least I was going home to see my parents and sisters.

I still felt very tense... Maybe they would change their minds and not let us go after all?

We hurried like men possessed to get out of the gates. But we had not taken into account the RPs, who turned most of us back for being incorrectly dressed.

As we had not been told how to dress 'properly' in civilian clothes we felt very frustrated and bitter. How in the hell does one dress properly in civilian clothes?

Didn't they have any feelings? They were wasting our precious pass time, which was only forty-eight hours anyway. We really hated them... Why weren't they out there fighting the guerrillas like we'd have to?

I tried to cram as much into my precious forty-eight hours as I could.

I saw movies, met old friends and got very drunk... which didn't take particularly long as I hadn't touched alcohol for six weeks. Above all I relished my mother's cooking and devoured her roast beef with extreme pleasure.

But the weekend was soon over and the Abba and Led Zeppelin records were put back in their sleeves. Before I knew what was happening my father was driving me back to the cold and inhospitable barracks. Where was the paternal power now to keep me from having to march through that red and white striped boom? I got out of the Citroen.

We plunged back into reality the moment we walked through the gates. RPs shouted at us and made us march.

Roll call was taken and the whole machinery of training jolted back into action as if we hadn't been away.

All that was left were memories.

In the barrack room everyone was reminiscing and bragging.

'Christ, you should have seen the bird I screwed,' exclaimed Lieberman. 'She was really bloody kinky, man.'

Poor Russell Lieberman was killed in action a few months later. He took the rap for his lieutenant who lost his nerve and failed to spring an ambush, thereby allowing a force of sixty guerrillas to go unharmed. To avoid the scandal and ignominy for the lieutenant, Lieberman was transferred in disgrace to another unit. A few days later he was dead. It was fate. As it was fate that the lieutenant would one day become an immensely successful insurance executive. We'd heard stories of officers being shot in the back by their own troops.....

'I don't know how you get a bird with the short fucking hair we've got,' Scott complained. 'I had hair over my shoulders before and I could pick and choose. Now they don't even look at me.'

'You're just ugly, man,' taunted little, ginger Peebles.

This was like the pot calling the kettle black and we all laughed as Scott attacked Peebles.

They rolled around, devastating Peebles' bed layout as he desperately tried to protest between strangle holds.

Then Condon leaped into the fray and soon the whole barrack room was involved.

In ten minutes the place was wrecked. Our kit was in a shambles and we had to start shining and polishing all over again. But as we were all half drunk anyway it didn't matter.

Bottles of rum and brandy appeared from nowhere and we soon completed the job.

The cleaning chores suddenly didn't bother us any more. Insults flew but the banter was good natured. The fact was we were trying to extend our weekend – and we only had each other.

Perhaps that was where our comradeship started. A comradeship that became so important it would help us through all the difficult times that lay ahead and take the place of everything outside of the RLI – even families and lovers.

And it would save the lives of many of us later on. We didn't know it then but the biggest guerrilla incursion of the war was only a few weeks off. ZANLA was on the march.



CHAPTER 2

Classical War Training

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or the next six weeks we were involved in classical war training. In many respects this phase was frustrating. We felt, wrongly as we found out later, that it was in no way related to the guerrilla warfare that we would be engaged in. It also was the most repetitive stage of the training.

The entire six weeks were spent preparing for a massive classical war exercise, during which we would be given a chance to demonstrate some of our new-found skills.

We learned about section battle drills, platoon battle drills and company battle drills. We spent long hours perfecting our skirmishing, and sometimes whole afternoons were spent doing the leopard crawl or practising bayonet drill.

The latter turned out to be extremely strenuous, for the main object of this exercise was to instil in us a sense of aggression. In the beginning we found it embarrassing, shouting at the top of our lungs as instructed, to charge at the inanimate and obviously completely harmless straw dummies.

‘You’re like fucking fairies!’ screamed Corporal Locke. ‘Around the grenade wall three times.’

And off we went, packs bouncing and our awkward NATO helmets wobbling.

We became infuriated at what to us seemed such undeserved punishment... But it happened so often that the instructors soon achieved their objective.

Previously I had thought the sight of sixty recruits screaming hysterically and stabbing straw sacks with outdated .303 bayonets as ludicrous. It was not until one has participated in the actual charges and been treated like filth by the instructors that one realised the object is to arouse the basest of instincts in a human being... Instincts normal society

decrees should be so well controlled that for practical purposes they no longer exist.

We also took part in an intensive assault course program. Perhaps the assault course was physically more tiring than bayonet drill, but it was infinitely more satisfying. It was competitive, and there were records to break and other squads to beat.

It gave me a tremendous feeling of satisfaction sitting muddy and breathless at the end of the course, to listen to Sergeant Larrett announce that Green Squad had beaten the rest.

The parade square didn't belong to us perhaps. But the assault course was ours without argument.

If we did particularly well we were rewarded with a canteen pass, which allowed us to go to the Troopers' Canteen for two hours in the evening. This was a great privilege, mainly because it gave us the opportunity to smirk at the other squads. And as enforced abstinence had lessened our capacity for alcohol two hours was plenty of time in which to get drunk

They were happy times, with the congenial Mavis serving us beers while in the background strains of Bob Marley's 'No Woman, No Cry' blared out over the jukebox.

Roll calls were a welcome relief from the pressures and strains of the course.

The NCO on duty had the floor to himself with a captive audience and could take as long over it as he liked. Many of the instructors had hidden acting talents which came to the surface at roll call and had us in fits of laughter.

Of course some instructors were just 'military' in their presentation in the sterile calling of names. To them it was merely another duty to be got over with as quickly as possible, and the recruit had to stay on his toes to ensure he got his 'Sam't!' or 'Corporal!' out before the instructor got to the next name.

The humourists however, were different.

They liked to stroll casually up and down the ranks with the roll in their hands, calling out the names slowly. Their favourite form of entertainment was to play on a recruit's name if possible, or highlight his misdemeanours or weak points. It was unfortunate for both of us that Goss

Condon's name came directly after mine, so we regularly were the butt of the NCOs' jokes.

'Cocks,' called the corporal.

'Corporal!' I bawled.

'Condon', the corporal followed on.

'Corporal!' yelled Goss.

The corporal paused and looked up thoughtfully.

'Cocks and Condon.' he shook his head and grinned. 'You two go well together, hey?'

This was guaranteed to produce hilarious laughter from the squad, and we overlooked the joke's monotonous regularity and smiled dutifully, taking it in the spirit in which it was meant.

We embarked on a series of runs known as the five-, ten- and twenty-milers. The instructors ran with us and they gave us the inspiration and encouragement to complete the distance.

My flat feet caused me incredible pain on those runs. But it became a matter of principle and dogged pride to me to keep up with the rest.

The twenty-miler was the worst, for we ran in full battle order. That is – NATO helmets, full webbing, and packs filled with bricks. In addition each squad had to carry ten awkward and heavy MAG machineguns. These were difficult to carry and therefore were continually swapped around within the squad.

Fortunately we had two really huge men in our squad, George MacDonald and Dop Viljoen, who could carry a machinegun the entire distance, and more often than not took two apiece.

It took every ounce of willpower not to give in and drop. It was mostly the fear of having to repeat the run that kept us going. If someone was snuggling or collapsing we earned him, otherwise we knew the entire squad would be disqualified.

We always sang while running. It not only kept us in time but supported our flagging spirits. Recruit Leid had composed a song for the squad which our instructors liked, so we were constantly ordered to sing it – especially when another squad was within hearing. The rival squad or squads would reciprocate in an effort to outvoice us. And as at times all four recruit squads would be singing at the tops of their voices the din would be horrific.

In the tenth week of training we were ordered to commence preparation for what was known as the ‘one-twenty miler’.

It was a the which sounded distinctly ominous.

The exercise lasted six days we were told, but when we worked out that we would have to walk thirty kilometres a day it didn’t sound too bad. In fact it began to be regarded as a welcome break from the unrelenting discipline of camp routine.

Our destination was Ngesi, one hundred and ten kilometres south-west of Salisbury.

No one had much idea of what kit to take and no one told us, though rumours flew that whatever we took in our kit bags would have to be carried throughout the march. The result naturally was that we skimped, so that by the end of the march we found ourselves seriously short of indispensable items.

But that was still to come and as we drove through the barrack gates we were elated.

We were allowed to wear our green commando berets and basked in the glow of unexpected and quite overweening pride. Admittedly the badge was the brass one worn by recruits and not the hallowed silver one of the commandos. But at least it was a start – we had begun to belong. We were no longer the dogshit of a few weeks prior.

We whistled at the girls from the back of the trucks as we drove through town and shouted abuse at long-haired civilian males.

‘Get a fucking haircut, you civvy!’

‘When are you going to join the army, you wanker?’

Remembering how I had suffered the same abuse when still a civilian I knew exactly how the unfortunate victims felt.

The trucks passed through Salisbury and soon we were on the open road with the lush Rhodesian veld flashing by.

Three hours later we arrived at the start point where we were ordered to set up camp. We had to erect tents for the officers and NCOs and dig shell scrapes, not only for ourselves but for the instructors as well.

When we had finished we were issued with two days’ rations and divided into sticks of six men.

I found myself in a stick commanded by a likeable recruit named Gareth David, (now dead).

He was briefed by the instructors and in turn briefed us. There were six legs of the march to complete and after finishing the second and fourth legs we were to rendezvous with an instructor at a pre-arranged place and time... and they warned us that if we failed to make it on time we would forego our ration issue for the next two days.

Although we were given ten rounds of live ammunition each we were not allowed to keep magazines on our rifles. They were issued merely as a precaution in case of the unlikely event of a contact with the enemy. It was really a remote possibility, because in 1976 the guerrillas operated mostly in the border areas and activity in the hinterland was minimal.

David led the way on the first leg and it was not long before the cumbersome packs were biting into our shoulders. We completed the first two legs in good time however and were issued with our rations.

But by the fourth day the march had begun to take its toll. I developed numerous blisters which chafed with ever-increasing pain, and it was not long before my feet were a hideous mass of blood and rotten skin.

‘Right, let’s rest here for a while,’ said David, and we collapsed thankfully in the shade of a large muwanga tree.

Some men took off their boots to treat their blisters but I didn’t dare. The ecstasy of airing my feet would in no way have compensated for the agony of putting my tight boots back on again. We sat smoking in silence, contemplating miserably the next twenty kilometres we still had to march that day, and I thought wistfully of the suffering of Captain Scott at the South Pole.

In fact I began to feel I wouldn’t make it. I had already started to straggle and keeping up with the rest became increasingly difficult.

‘I don’t know why a bloody kaffir bus doesn’t come along,’ complained Lieberman indignantly. ‘Bet you the other sticks are getting lifts.’

‘Ja,’ replied David thoughtfully, weighing it up, ‘but if we get caught like De Bruyn’s stick was, we’ll have to walk sixty-five kays a day’

‘I reckon it’s worth a try if we get the chance,’ I insisted.

Finally we all agreed and decided to requisition the next available transport that came along.

Our luck was in for shortly afterwards we heard the splutter of an approaching engine. A battered, old van appeared around the corner. We

leaped into the middle of the road brandishing our rifles and it shuddered to a halt.

The van was already packed full with local peasants. But the driver was a genial sort and he was quickly persuaded to allow us to pile on as well. A couple of us had to sit on the bonnet and two more stood on the bumper but at least we were aboard.

The van's arrival was regarded as a much-needed miracle, made even more lustrous when our friendly driver said he was going to a place only three kilometres from our rendezvous. Our spirits soared. The gods were certainly smiling on us.

We rattled and bumped along at a snail's pace, but despite the discomfort I for one felt as if I was in the lap of luxury. We eventually arrived at an African business centre, a handful of rustic shops and huts in a tribal trust land. Fowls were scratching in the dirt while piccanins played around the huts and a few mangy dogs lazed in the shade, indolently snapping at worrisome flies.

The van ground to a halt, and as the engine died we tumbled to the ground. Our beaming driver who plainly was no fool, asked, 'You want beer, huh?'

The six of us looked at each other. We knew we couldn't possibly go to the RV yet. It was only 1030hrs. and to arrive so early would have appeared more than suspicious to the instructor... So we had to pass the time somehow – and what better way was there?

We nodded enthusiastically.

'Ja, mushe, dinoda beer.'

After raking through our pockets we managed to put together a reasonable pool of cash that ensured we would not go thirsty and our host led the way to a rather disreputable looking shebeen. An ancient, bespectacled, white-haired African who was equally as genial as our host, served us quart-bottles of beer.

Another miracle – the beer was actually cold! I came to learn that no matter where you are in Africa, you will always find a cold beer nearby. We took the bottles outside and relaxed in the sunshine and I soon forgot about my feet as the beautiful life-giving fluid started to take effect. The morning and afternoon passed peacefully and at about 1630hrs. we reluctantly decided it was time to call it a day.

We bade fond and hearty farewells to our black hosts, who were as drunk as we were, and tramped off down the road singing lustily. I vaguely remember asking myself what sane reason on earth had brought us to such a position where we were actually fighting these kind people.

*Fuck you and you and you and you,
Fuck you and you and you.
Fuck you and you and you and you,
For the sake of Auld Lang Syne.*

This episode however, afforded only temporary relief to our feet. By the next day they were as bad as ever and because of this, although we made the last RV – the base camp, we were two hours late.

Sergeant Larrett venomously bawled us out and threatened extra punishment walks. But I think he realised our plight for nothing ever came of it. The medic was kept busy that night. He seemed to revel in puncturing the blisters and injecting them with a vile yellow ointment which stung unbelievably.

‘I’m bloody sure you enjoy this,’ accused David howling in pain.

‘Not at all,’ denied the smirking medic, ‘it’s just part of the job.’

My feet took two weeks to fully recover and sometimes after a particularly hard drill session I found I could barely walk. Eventually I was forced to seek medical attention and was excused boots and given three days light duty.

It was bliss for my feet but torture for my self-esteem, because I was immediately classified as a ‘waster’ and subjected to continual torment by the instructors.

What wonied me more than anything though, was that I might be classified as having failed the course...and made to start all over again. But fortunately, as soon as my feet were healed I was accepted back by the squad as an equal. The thought of being back-squadded was just too much to contemplate.

The next exercise, the final stage of our classical war training, was to take place on the Somabula Flats, a bleak and windswept, seemingly endless plain near Gwelo which was renowned for its miserable cold. The exercise

involved the entire course as well as officer cadets from the School of Infantry in Gwelo.

Although the officer cadets were our contemporaries there was no love lost between us. For some reason they considered themselves far superior and looked down on us as mere cannon fodder.

The Air Force was also involved in the exercise.

We journeyed to Gwelo and spent the night at the School of Infantry. Orders were issued by the cadets who told us the entire operation would resemble a real battle. Green and Yellow Squads represented one army while Blue and Red Squads made up the opposition. We were to practise every phase of the classical war battle – the advance, the withdrawal, snatch patrols, reconnaissance, and so on.

‘Fucking officer wankers,’ complained Scott. ‘They think they know everything.’

‘Don’t worry’ exclaimed Leid, ‘we’ll soon show them what RLI skates really are.’

‘What we must do,’ I said, ‘is pretend we’re utter morons and be as uncooperative as possible.’

‘Otten is a complete moron anyway,’ giggled Fletcher, ‘so at least he doesn’t have to pretend.’

‘Ha, ha, ha.’

It was Otten’s stock reply for everything.

All in all it was an interesting night in the barracks, with all the recruits trying by various devious means to lay their hands on some liquor.

The next morning we were wakened at dawn by the officer cadets who bundled us onto vehicles. The atmosphere was aggravated during the drive to Somabula by the officer cadets who kept shouting at us without reason. They obviously were relishing their first taste of authority and bending over backwards in an effort to impress their instructors.

‘Hey you, recruit, put your seat belt on.’

‘Recruits, keep your bloody webbing on.’

‘Put that cigarette out. Who gave you permission to smoke?’

As the culprit grudgingly stubbed out the cigarette I asked, ‘Permission to smoke... sir?’

The request was turned down which was humiliating. Our instructors usually allowed us to smoke if asked reasonably, and evil plans were hatched in which we would get our revenge by cutting the whippersnappers

down to size. The trucks finally came to a halt and once again we were subjected to a barrage of commands. Within minutes the entire course was fallen in and ready to commence the exercise.

‘God knows why we’re doing this,’ complained Scott. ‘We’re going to fight a terr war, not a damned classical one.’

The officer cadets’ platoon commanders led us off to the positions where we were to dig trenches and I was pleased that Rob Scott was my bivvy partner. The trenches had to be two metres deep and a metre wide, with a covered sleeping bay excavated into the side. When we’d finished we had to dig shell scrapes a few metres away in the shade of some large msasa trees.

‘Right soldiers, start digging. I want these trenches finished by nightfall,’ ordered our cadet, shouting again.

‘Fuck him,’ swore Scott as the cadet swaggered off like he was already a major. ‘This ground’s as hard as a fucking rock. We’ll never finish it in time.’

We took our entrenching tools (spades) and commenced digging. As Scott had predicted the ground was like rock and we were still hard at work at midnight, by which time we had dug only just over a metre.

Captain Cooper appeared in the early hours of the morning to carry out a snap inspection.

‘Taking your time, aren’t you soldier?’

‘The ground’s too hard sir, and there are masses of roots,’ Scott told him.

‘I don’t believe the enemy would worry too much about that, do you?’ asked the captain sarcastically. ‘Get a bloody move on!’

A sycophantic cadet was in tow and he also had his say.

‘You heard the captain. Now hurry up or you’ll both find yourselves on a charge!’

‘Fuck them both,’ Scott swore after they had left. ‘It’s one in the morning already and I refuse to dig any more.’

I agreed and throwing down our picks and shovels, we lay down to sleep.

The stand-to whistle blew at 0500hrs. Like zombies we donned helmets and got into battle order. Then we waited for the cadets to come around for inspection... and the inevitable charge for failing to complete the trench.

During the night however, the bottom of the trench had filled up with rain water, and I had an idea.

‘Rob,’ I said, ‘with water in the trench, they won’t know how deep it is, will they? If we kneel in the muddy water it’ll seem like we’re standing.’

‘Ja,’ smiled Scott, ‘that’s a fucking good idea.’

We did it and it did look as if we were standing. The cadets never found out and we were delighted at our small victory.

Another bone of contention was that we were ordered to sleep in the squalid little bay, deep in the foul-smelling earth – like moles. It was claustrophobic and on the second night the dank den was invaded by evil-smelling Matabele ants, so we went and slept on the ground above.

On the third night a snooping cadet caught us out. He kicked Scott in the ribs and told us to get to our feet and stand to attention. We struggled from our sleeping-bags and stood up.

‘What the hell do you two think you’re doing up here?’ ranted the man. ‘Get back into your sleeping bay before I charge you!’

At this Scott finally lost his patience.

‘The place is swarming with Matabele ants,’ he said, deliberately omitting the ‘sir’

‘I don’t care if there are ants or cobras down there,’ the cadet retorted, ‘get back in your sleeping bay.’

‘I refuse! You go and sleep there if you want to.’

Scott had thrown all caution to the wind.

‘Are you wilfully disobeying a lawful order?’

‘Not wilfully, but we are not going back in that hole. Come on... come and make us,’ Scott growled furiously. He stood there aggressively, hands on his hips and the cadet backed off, wisely deciding not to push his luck.

‘Captain Cooper will hear of this. I’ll see that you both swing,’ he said and stalked off.

We never heard another word on the subject however – and we continued to sleep above ground. It was a second victory for us. As the exercise continued we exasperated the cadets by our unwillingness to cooperate. We deliberately lagged behind on night patrols and more than once I managed to lose the rest of the patrol to my front. A judiciously timed cough on a snatch patrol was an ideal way of compromising the operation too, and infuriating the officer cadets at the same time.

We had been instructed that our operation must be a simulation of actual war and every evening hot rations were brought to the 'front' by instructors in Land-Rovers from the mobile kitchens at the rear. They served both sides in the 'conflict' but fortuitously, were situated behind our lines... So the Red and Blue Army instructors had to drive through our lines to collect the vats of food – and they obviously considered a truce existed for the purpose.

But nothing had been officially declared and midway through the exercise a group of enterprising men from Yellow Squad decided to ambush the vehicle during its evening graze run. Everything went according to plan and the Land-Rover was captured along with the driver Sergeant Lewis and all the vats of steaming food destined for the 'enemy' army.

Our lads took great delight in tipping the food out on to the road and deflating the vehicle's tyres before releasing the woebegone Sergeant Lewis who had to walk back to his lines. This must have been bad for the morale of the 'enemy' who obviously went hungry that night, and we were delighted. But needless to say a truce was negotiated after that, and Red and Blue Squads didn't go without meals again.

The exercise ended with a night battle (I was never told who won) with Air Force Hunter jets involved. As we blindly followed our officer cadets into battle the noise was intense – and memorable.

This signalled the end of the classical war phase of our training. We returned to Salisbury, parting ways with the officer cadets at Gwelo.

'Fucking pratts,' muttered Sammy Beahan, recently arrived from the British Paras, as our trucks drove out of the School of Infantry gates. 'They wouldn't last two minutes in Ulster!'



CHAPTER 3

Counter-insurgency (COIN) Training

A

lthough discipline was as stem as ever and the physical training even more rigorous, we gradually became immune to the hardships of soldiering – or rather, to the hardships of training.

There were subtle changes in the attitudes of our instructors who didn't seem quite so vindictive and even on occasion congratulated us on notable achievements. It seemed strange but we felt as if they were becoming genuinely proud of us.

Now and again however, we still would be severely punished, or our passes would be cancelled which was far worse than any physical punishment. This would cut us down to size again.

We relished the counter-insurgency training. It was the type of warfare in which we would be engaged and we began to feel closer to reality.

We practised the jungle lane so often that snap shooting at hidden targets became second nature to us. That was fortunate for this exercise more than any other was to save countless lives and account for thousands of dead guerrillas.

Shooting became a matter of instinct.

We learned the mysteries of how to lay mines and how to lift them, and they taught us how to set ambushes using claymores and RIMI antipersonnel mines.

We learned the drills on being ambushed, both when on foot and in vehicles. We learned about dead ground, about shape, shadow, silhouette, shine and size.

We were taught how to emplane and deplane from mock-ups of the Alouette helicopter. The great day finally came when a real helicopter landed on the football field and we took turns at putting our drills into practice. After a short, exhilarating flight around the field we deplaned. It

was a thrilling and exciting experience and we regarded the pilot and his gunner-technician with awe. Being combat veterans they were understandably bored with the whole procedure and when they weren't ignoring us entirely, snapped irritably at us raw recruits.

The physical training intensified too and I didn't look forward to the day of our test. I knew if I failed I would be thrown off the course.

One hundred sit-ups... one hundred press-ups... star jumps... bunny hops... sprints... and, last of all, the fearful pull-ups.

Although in peak physical condition, this test pushed us to the limits of endurance. I thought every muscle and fibre in my body was ripping apart as I willed myself to continue and complete the exercises within the allotted time span. However we all passed satisfactorily and that evening Sergeant Larrett awarded us a canteen pass. But we were far too exhausted to enjoy it and after a couple of beers we stumbled away and collapsed on our beds.

The real test of endurance was still to come.

'Ja, okes,' wamed Scott, 'that was nothing. Next week we've got the survival course.'

We laughed heartily.

'Oh, that's bugger all,' said Lieberman. 'At least we won't have to run anywhere.'

'I'm telling you,' insisted Scott, 'I was speaking to some of the okes in 149 and they reckon that the survival course is the worst of all. No graze for a whole week either.'

'Ja,' interrupted Fletcher, 'but they teach you how to survive by tapping animals, so it can't be all that bad'

'Hah, you scheme they can teach us that in a few days? The Selous Scouts are taught that sort of thing and it takes them weeks – anyway what kind of army has to resort to that kind of bullshit?'

We left it at that. We'd learned by experience to cross hurdles only when confronted with them.

The confrontation soon came when a few days later we found ourselves in the bush near Mazoe Dam, about fifty kilometres north of Salisbury. Sergeant Major Moose personally conducted the training. He had a wealth of knowledge about the bush and survival in its hostile environment.

He showed us which benies could be eaten and which couldn't. He taught us how to make twine from tree bark. He demonstrated the setting of

snare and traps for hares, birds and small antelope, and he showed us the signs that indicated when water was present.

Unfortunately for Scott and I we paid little attention.

‘Screw this, I’m not a bloody bushman. We’ll smuggle some graze into our packs before we start the course.’

‘Ja, but they search us before we go.’

‘Where are we going to hide our smokes? I don’t mind going without graze for a week, but I’ll be damned if I won’t smoke!’

The ominous day approached and we lined up in our squads to be given instructions. If they were going to search us this would be the time. Moose strode into the clearing to address us.

‘Right, you little cunts,’ he growled, ‘now is your chance to put into practice what I’ve taught you. I’ll see you in seven days.’ He turned and padded back to the mess tent.

A sigh of relief rippled through the ranks and we began picking up our packs.

‘Not so fast,’ shouted Corporal Locke. We first have to search you. We don’t trust you little skates!’

Groans swept through the squad as the instructors ruthlessly got to work. Packs and webbing, sleeping bags and uniforms, all were flung to the ground. The instructors were thorough and large quantities of booty in the way of food and cigarettes were rooted out.

One unfortunate had tried to smuggle a big packet of Pronutro in his pack. But an eagle-eyed instructor soon found it. Pronutro, a breakfast cereal made from wheat, is nutritious and rich in proteins and vitamins, so was consequently a favourite with the recruits. But it needed to be mixed with liquid, either milk or water, to make it palatable.

The instructors recalled Moose from his tent, where he had settled down with a bottle of whisky, to inspect this valuable contraband.

‘You’re a nasty little cheat, aren’t you?’ Moose growled softly to the culprit.

‘Sir!’

‘So you like baby food do you?’ mused Moose. Well, since you like it so much I suggest you demonstrate your liking to the other recruits.’ He paused and glowered somewhat theatrically at the rest of us.

‘Now eat it,’ he ordered. ‘ALL of it.’ He thrust the packet at the trembling recruit.

You... you mean dry, sir?’

‘Don’t answer me back. Just eat it!’ screamed the company sergeant major.

We watched in sympathetic silence as the poor recruit opened the packet and began shovelling the cereal into his mouth. It must have been like eating sawdust. Ten minutes later the two-kilo packet was empty and the recruit was gagging and spluttering uncomfortably.

‘That’ll stop the runs, won’t it?’ smirked the CSM. ‘You must be really thirsty now eh?’

Unable to speak the recruit nodded abjectly.

‘Good, so now I want you to drink both your water bottles.’

‘Both sir?’

‘Both.’

Scott who was next to me winced. ‘The poor sod, he’ll pop like a bloody tick!’ he whispered.

The cereal expanded rapidly with the water and we watched with considerable pity as the recruit collapsed on the ground, clutching his stomach in agony. It was on this sombre note of warning that we commenced our trial by ordeal.

Scott and I had managed to smuggle a few dog biscuits as they were somewhat unkindly known, a tube of margarine and a couple of packets of cigarettes. We marched jauntily enough to our objective. This turned out to be a pleasant bivouac position beside a shady stream, so at least water would not pose a problem. That night we ate our dog biscuits and lay gazing up at the stars, smoking a precious cigarette.

‘What are we going to do now Rob?’ I asked.

‘Christ knows. I wish I’d paid attention during the lectures.’

‘Some of the ouens in De Bruyn’s stick brought some fishing hooks and line. D’you reckon we should try to borrow some?’

‘Not a chance,’ snorted Scott, ‘those arseholes are so tight they wouldn’t give us ice in winter.’

‘We’ve got six days to go and...’ My words petered out at the enormity of it all.

We calculated that we would be able to share one cigarette every three hours for the next few days and agreed to adhere rigidly to this schedule of rationing. But as the days passed we found that smoking on an empty stomach was not such a good idea. The smoke seemed to go straight to the

brain and create an instant headache, while our stomachs contorted and gave us violent cramps.

Initially we made half-hearted attempts to search for berries and fruit but gave up when Lieberman became ill after eating berries we had decided were edible. We even tried setting traps, crude affairs made from sticks and rocks, but no self-respecting hare ever came close.

‘It’s a waste of time,’ grumbled Scott. ‘We’ll never catch any of the bloody things if we can’t find their trails.’

What do hare’s trails look like anyway?’ I enquired.

‘Haven’t a clue.’

‘De Bruyn caught some small bream today,’ I reported.

The faint smell of fish cooking wafting over from their camp made our mouths water.

‘I know – Lieberman went and begged a few pieces. But I’m damned if I’m going to snivel to those ouens.’ We agreed we would rather starve than give De Bruyn and his men the satisfaction of seeing us beg.

We lost track of time as the days and nights blurred together during that agonising endurance course. We spoke little and rarely moved out of our sleeping-bags, though occasionally we would stumble down to the stream to drink. But the water only accentuated our hunger and I soon came to hate its muddy taste.

On the seventh day the exercise drew to a close and we weakly followed our stick leader back in the direction of camp. He had not fared well either. His skin was drawn tight over his cheeks, his ribs showed, the cavern his stomach had become painfully contorted each time he breathed, and all in all he looked not unlike a skeleton.

After what seemed like an eternity we stumbled into camp, to be greeted by the instructors who seemed strangely pleased to see us. A sumptuous stew was waiting for us and in spite of warnings to the contrary, we set to and devoured it ravenously. On empty bellies this was unwise and some of us suffered serious stomach cramps as a result. But they paled into insignificance and were quickly forgotten when we were told we had been granted a weekend pass.

Somewhat to our chagrin some of the men looked remarkably healthy despite their ordeal. Soon the stories began to emerge and we learned that apart from the illicit food which most of them had been able to successfully smuggle past the prying eyes of the instructors and a few fish caught with

contraband hooks, the recruits had survived by a surprising variety of means.

Those who had paid attention at lectures did it the proper way of course, finding the right types of berries, trapping hares and mice with the use of snares and shooting birds from the trees with home-made catapults.

But the honours went to the men of Yellow Squad who hungry beyond belief had taken to roaming the veld en masse – some sixty or so of them – in search of antelope and small game. And on the third day when they spotted a bushbuck on the edge of a vlei the chase began in earnest.

A bushbuck is regarded universally as a particularly aggressive antelope, for its sweeping scimitar-like horns can cause vicious injuries. This particular beast however, understandably terrified at the sight of some sixty starving humans howling towards it, wasted no time in taking a second look but took off as fast as it could.

The chase lasted for hours, the recruits taking turns to run the animal down, and eventually the exhausted creature plunged thrashing and kicking into a thicket from which it was unable to extricate itself. Moments later the recruits were on him and soon the animal was dead, savagely beaten to death with sticks and rocks.

Shortly afterwards the bushbuck had been skinned and gutted and a freshly kindled fire had begun to blaze... and less than two hours later all that remained of the animal were its bones – and even they had been cracked open to get at the marrow.

Despite being a laudable effort it somehow reminded me of the book 'Lord of the Flies' and I shuddered as I realised how little it really takes to bring out the primitive instincts of survival in any man. It wasn't a game anymore.

It was a grand day indeed, our passing-out parade day in May 1976 when we fell in in squad formations on the hard-standing outside Training Troop.

We thrilled to the knowledge that it would not be long before we would exchange the brass badges on our berets for the silver lion and horn badges of the commandos and be issued with our 'greens' or number ones, the ceremonial dress of the battalion. I found the white gloves that went with the number ones particularly dashing..

But on that day we wore camouflage drill order, our khaki shirts crisp and starched, our black anklets and stick boots gleaming from countless

applications of Kiwi polish and candlewax. The white rifle slings, strung tight, contrasted with the metallic glow of our FN rifles which we had lovingly cleaned. White bayonet frogs hung at our sides from immaculate white stick belts.

‘Face your front Scott,’ hissed Sergeant Larrett. He was nervous and obviously anxious that the squad should perform well. ‘Now remember your mummies and daddies are watching. We don’t want to fuck it up do we?’ he muttered.

We made final adjustments to our dress and awaited orders from the CSM who was prowling up and down the ranks like an agitated panther. As usual he growled abuse and insults at the troops, but somehow today the malice was missing.

Sergeant Larrett and Corporal Locke fussed about us, more like bridesmaids on a wedding day than instructors on parade.

‘Otten,’ said Corporal Locke through his teeth, ‘if you lose step I’m personally going to ram your bayonet up your fucking arse, do you understand?’

‘Yes, corp.’

‘Don’t call me corp, you’re not in the commando yet.’

‘Yes, corporal.’

The bass drum began to beat out resonantly and Moose’s voice echoed above the band.

‘PA... RADE, BY THE LE... FT, OU... ICK MARCH!’

Then the band struck up the regimental march, ‘The Saints’ and we stepped out and marched resolutely onto the parade ground.

I glimpsed Sergeant Larrett marching next to me, head held high, his eyes misted with a film of tears and his adam’s apple bobbing emotionally. I strained to stand more erect and put every ounce of feeling into each step. I was bursting with pride and I thought of my comrades all around me with love and affection.

Suddenly we were a unit of grace and military precision and our once-reviled instructors seemed more like elder brothers. This was the largest intake ever to pass out in the RLI... and they were the ones who had made it successful.

The whole event is like a dream to me now.

I can mistily remember the commanding officer of the battalion addressing us and the various recruits going forward to receive their awards

– best recruit, best shottist and so on.

For some reason I particularly recall Mr. R K. van der Byl, the Minister of Defence (wearing a silly hat) as he inspected the parade. Perhaps it is because in the papers the next day there was a picture of him talking to me and a young Scottish recruit standing immediately to my left.

But most of all I remember the order ‘Fix Bayonets.’ This is a most difficult drill manoeuvre yet somehow we executed it that day with absolute precision. To me this somehow represented the final symbol of becoming a commando.

The battalion had recently received the Freedom of the City of Salisbury, and I suddenly felt I had received the ‘freedom’ of the battalion. The parade went without a hitch and as we marched off I again glanced at Sergeant Larrett. His face was glistening with tears.

“Well done, ouens,” he mumbled, his face set resolutely to the front, ‘that was bloody good.’

After being dismissed I sought out my parents and sisters and spent the rest of the day showing them around the battalion, interspersed with teas and a grand luncheon.

At 1700hrs. the relatives and visitors departed for home and we, now fully-fledged commandos, adjourned to the Troopers’ Canteen to get drunk. It was a lively party and the instructors joined in the frivolity and taught us the bawdy songs of the commandos.

Even CSM Moose Erasmus was there and he soon became very drunk. I shall never forget in the later stages of the evening hearing his mammoth voice resounding across the canteen.

‘My boys,’ he sobbed happily, ‘my boys... You’re not too bad really’

The following is a report that appeared in The Rhodesia Herald the day after our passing out parade.

RLI NOW UP TO FULL STRENGTH

Herald Reporter

The Rhodesian Light Infantry was taken up to full strength when the biggest intake in the Battalion’s history passed out at Cranborne Barracks yesterday.

Intake 150 consisted of 220 national servicemen and regulars from schools, universities, commerce and industry who had completed 17 weeks of training to prepare them for active service in the war against terrorism.

The Minister of Defence, Mr. P.K. Van der Byl, told the parade and the crowd of about 1 000 relatives and friends of the recruits that the day was a “milestone in the steady strengthening and expansion of the Army that is taking place in all sectors.

“This is the first time a complete intake of this size has been allocated to the RLI. It is also the first time in a very long period that the regiment will be fully up to strength.”

He told the recruits after he had reviewed the parade of five platoons, lined up three deep on the parade ground: “You are fighting for the right of all our people to live in peace, happiness and prosperity.

“To you will fall the honour of exacting the most temble vengeance for our comrades and compatriots who have been maimed, mutilated and murdered by the terrorist beasts.

“You will be the instruments which will safeguard the right of all our people to have a share in this earthly paradise in which we are privileged to live.”

After the Minister had inspected the parade, he presented the Colin Lennard Floating trophy for the best recruit to Recruits Ron Lindsay, Willem de Beer, Justin Graham and Andy Van der Heever.

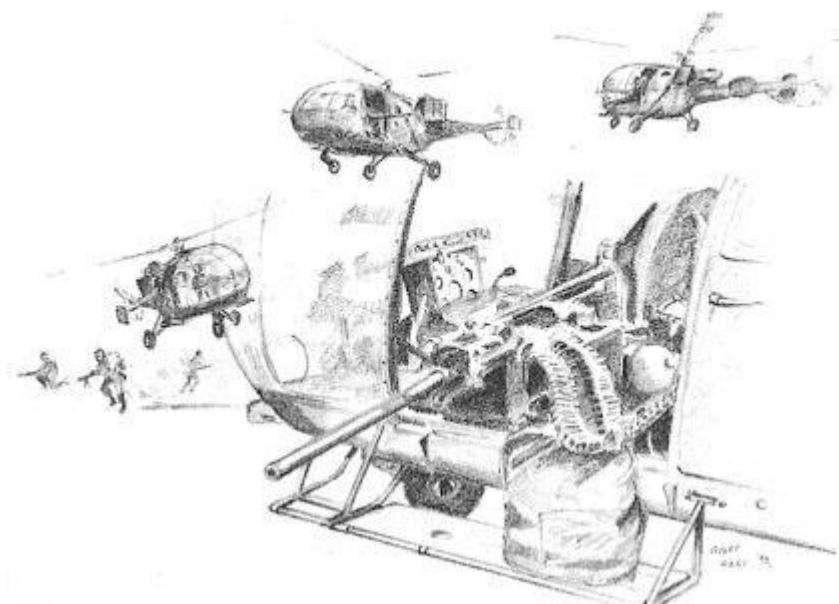
Recruit Dean Wood received the award for the Best Academic, and the prize for the Top Recruit Marksman went to Recruit Van der Heever.

During the morning, parents, relatives and friends were given a display by four teams of recruits going through the assault course. Also on hand was a show of a number of terrorist weapons captured since the onset of the war.

Just before the parade Recruit Ian Reid (24) performed a parachute jump from about 1500 metres with Salisbury parachutist Buster Brown.

Intake 150 will go to the operational areas for active service next Thursday, after a few days’ leave, an army spokesman said.

Stirring words – we were too relieved to be done with Training Troop and too proud of our achievements to even question them. We had become fighting machines.



CHAPTER 4

The Battalion and Fireforce

W

e were given four days leave before reporting to our respective commandos and Fletcher. Peebles, Otten and I decided to rent a holiday cottage in the Inyanga Mountains. This is an area in the east of Rhodesia that is surprisingly like the Scottish highlands. It is quite unlike the rest of the country and a few days of breathing the clean, pine-scented mountain air and waking to the cool, mist-clad mornings made a wonderful break.

We piled into Fletcher's little Bellette sedan with a crate of beer and three hours later, somewhat the worse for wear, arrived at a quaint stone cottage nestling in the mountain mist.

The next two carefree days were spent swimming in the crisp mountain streams and fishing for trout. In the absence of female companionship the evenings were given over to bouts of somewhat drunken revelry... and our overindulgence was soon to catch up with us.

On the way back to Salisbury we stopped and picked up two blonde Australian girls who were hitching a ride back to Salisbury. We insisted they squeeze into the car with us. Though initially wary they eventually succumbed... and a few minutes later while I was in the process of making tentative, amorous advances to the blonder of the two girls, Otten was suddenly overcome by past dissipation and vomited over them both.

It was most embarrassing and strangely enough after that there was nothing we could say that would keep them in the car.

'Otten, you jerk,' I muttered, opening another beer, 'you've caused enough shit for us in Training Troop – and now this!'

Fletcher's giggling developed into hysterical laughter – so much so that Peebles had to slap him across the back of the head to keep him from driving off the road. Fletcher was still tittering when we rolled into Salisbury two hours later.

Being from Green Squad we naturally chose to go to 3 Commando, although we did have a choice. Otten, for example, decided he would be different and to go to 2 Commando... Perhaps he felt guilty about the Inyanga episode.

Evidently the nickname of 3 Commando, 'The Lovers', was derived from the high rate of illegitimate births spawned by troopers in the earlier days of the war.

1 Commando, or 'The Big Red' as it was called, drew her recruits from Red Squad, 2 Commando from the Blue Squad, and 3 Commando's came from Green Squad.

Support Commando, nicknamed 'The Elite', drew men from the Yellow Squad. Until recently they had acted as the Support Weapons Group for the battalion and had been known as Support Group. But with the escalation of hostilities they had assumed full commando status and now performed the same tasks and duties as the other commandos, in addition to reverting to a specialised weapons' support role when required.

The last group or company was Base Group. As the name implies, this consisted mainly of non-combatant personnel – the signallers, medics, regimental police, transport (MT), caterers, pay office and administrative staff all came under the Base Group umbrella.

Originally the battalion had been modelled on a conventional infantry battalion with three companies, each with four platoons, a support group and a base group. Later, when the battalion was remodelled on commando lines, the basic structure stayed the same except the companies became commandos and the platoons became troops. Each commando consisted of four troops and a complement of HQ staff plus Base Group attaches like signallers, MT representatives, caterers, an MA3 medic and so on.

Troops had establishments of thirty men each and were commanded by 2nd lieutenants, with sergeants as 2 I/Cs. Unlike a conventional platoon however, RLI troops were broken down into sticks of four men as opposed to the more usual sections of eight.

The reason for this was simple – Alouette helicopters could only carry four men.

Originally the choppers carried five plus the pilot. But then twin Browning machineguns manned by an Air Force gunner-technician were mounted and this changed. Thereafter the Alouette had the dual role of gunship and troop carrier.

A stick comprised three riflemen and a MAG gunner and was commanded by a corporal, a lance corporal or senior trooper. The troop officer and troop sergeant also acted as stick leaders when necessary.

The commando was usually commanded by a major, the OC, with a captain as his 2 I/C. The latter was responsible for administration and under him fell the commando sergeant major, a W02, the commando quartermaster (a colour sergeant) and the orderly clerk who was a corporal.

Fortunately the system allowed great flexibility, as troop strengths fluctuated alarmingly. This was primarily due to the shortage of trained and experienced personnel – an escalating problem as the war progressed – and occasionally as a result the commando OC or the CQ led sticks into action.

During times of particularly bad staff shortages the commando could find itself commanded by a 2nd lieutenant, while troops were led by lance corporals or even by senior troopers... At one particular time 11 Troop, to which I was assigned, was down to a strength of only seven men – not even enough for two complete sticks.

It was greatly to the credit of the non-combatant personnel in 3 Commando that they continually volunteered for combat duties. And thus it was that the clerks, MT reps, medics, signallers and even the cooks saw action.

The main duty of the RLI was manning fireforces, a task at which the battalion proved particularly adept. A fireforce was responsible for reacting to any guerrilla incident, such as ambushes, OP sightings or enemy contacts, with as much haste as possible in order to cut off and kill the guerrillas before they could flee.

A number of fireforce bases were established around the country, initially at forward airfields (FAFs) or at Joint Operational Command Centres (JOCs). The main fireforce bases were at Grand Reef Aerodrome near Umtali on the eastern border, Mount Darwin and Mtoko in the north east and Buffalo Range Airport in the southeastern Lowveld. A host of minor, temporary fireforce bases were established later at places like Ruda in the Honde Valley, Shabani, Fort Victoria, Mabalauta in the Lowveld and even in Salisbury itself.

One of the advantages of the fireforce system was its flexibility. All that was needed was a reasonable airstrip.

The fireforce principle required a high level of cooperation between the Air Force and the Army and this was maintained at all times. The Army

provided the combat troops while the Air Force supplied the helicopters, the fixed-wing aircraft and the pilots.

Each fireforce had a K-car (Killer car) gunship – an Alouette helicopter mounted with a 20mm cannon which was flown by the senior pilot, often a squadron leader. It carried the commando OC who directed ground operations from an orbit high enough above the contact area to see everything that was happening.

Three or four troop-carrying Alouette helicopters, known as G-cars, ferried troops to and from a contact zone (Bell helicopters were introduced in 1979). The choppers were also responsible for casualty evacuations (CASEVACs) and resupplying ground troops with arms and ammunition.

The object was to deploy as many troops on the ground within a given area and in as short a time as possible to entrap the enemy.

Once the G-cars had disgorged the first wave of troops they returned to base to collect the second. Depending on distances the second wave would sometimes proceed toward the contact area on the ground – in vehicles loaded with drums of fuel for the helicopters. This reduced the turnaround time.

The major restraining factor on military operations during the Rhodesian war was a desperate shortage of helicopters. It was as a direct result of this shortage that the battalion would in time be forced to change over to a paratroop role so Dakotas could be used to supplement the helicopters.

However this had one advantage. A Dakota was able to drop twenty paratroops, five sticks of four men each, simultaneous to the heliborne troops going into action. This considerably increased a fireforce punch.

Acting in support of each fireforce was a Reims-Cessna F337 'Lynx' fixed-wing aircraft. Although ungainly it had the ability to hover almost like a dragonfly, making it an excellent support weapon's platform that was capable of delivering its SNEB rockets and frantan (napalm) with deadly accuracy. In fact it was usually the Lynx that initiated the attack, with the 20mm cannon of the K-car helicopter hammering away in support.

Ground troops were also put in as stop groups, to prevent the guerrillas from escaping.

After the initial air strike had gone in, the main sweep line moved forward towards the centre of the contact area, either killing the guerrillas or driving them onto the guns of the stop groups.

At any time during an operation, stick leaders could call on the K-car and the Lynx for support (if available). As well as this – a comforting thought for the troops when hard-pressed – should a fireforce encounter really stiff resistance, Hawker Hunter fighter-bombers or Canberra bombers were on twenty-four hour stand-by at New Sarum Air Base in Salisbury and the RAF Air Base in Gwelo.

Although the Rhodesian Light Infantry and the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) provided the bulk of the fireforce troops, other units such as the Selous Scouts, the Special Air Service (SAS) and the various territorial companies occasionally undertook the duties as well.

Apart from the RLI, the RAR were undoubtedly the most qualified and experienced in the fireforce role, and although the RLI accounted for the majority of guerrilla casualties during the war equal credit must go to units like the Selous Scouts, the territorials and PATU who almost invariably were responsible for calling in the fireforces... Most successful fireforce actions resulted in fact, from information and sightings made by the Selous Scouts.

The Scouts, who ran pseudo-guerrilla operations that sometimes resulted in them actually living with their opponents, had an uncanny knack of locating the enemy and their reports were almost always accurate.

On the other hand, it obviously was comforting for units on the ground like the Scouts to know that the RLI and RAR fireforces were always available to help them out if they found themselves in sticky situations.

Flags of 3 Commando

Commando Flag

The 3 Commando flag depicts a rampant yellow banana on a green background, with the number 3 superimposed on it. Green was always the commando colour. It represents the many years the commando spent on operations in the bush, is one of the many colours found in the Zambesi Valley and other parts of the country, and is a reminder to all that the dreaded 'Lovers' were very much a force to be reckoned with. (All 3 Commando sporting teams wore green jerseys. Affectionately known as the 'green machine' they on many occasions overwhelmed all before them, and won the champion sporting trophy more often than any other sub unit.)

While the number 3 on the flag is self-explanatory the banana needs clarification. At the stage of Operation Cauldron in 1968 the commando had no flag and the OC, Major Hugh Rowley, decided it was high time to introduce such an emblem. The commando at that time had seen no action and so was somewhat lacking on the 'kill rate' chart. However it was mainly through the reputation of the OC who nicknamed 'the lovers' and who was much in demand by the Salisbury 'crows', that the 2-IC decided that a banana might fit the bill! Thus, when his wife made the first 3 Commando Flag the 'lovers' became visual reality... After Operation Cauldron 3 Commando came away with the highest kill rate. It became the champion commando shortly afterwards and the flag fluttered outside the commando block to the envy of all.

11 Troop Flag

Once the commando flag had come into existence each troop decided to make its own. 11 Troop, or 'Legs Eleven' as it was called, had as its flag a pair of overtly feminine legs depicted on a green background. This flag was invented during the age of the miniskirt and the OC of the troop lived up to the 3 Commando motto 'the lovers'... In fact his second favourite weekend pastime was to park in Salisbury's busy city centre and appreciatively scrutinise the limbs of the fair sex as they went by.

12 Troop Flag

12 Troop in 1968 captured the first of the Russian flags found inside the country. This prize was immediately turned into the troop flag and remained so thereafter

13 Troop Flag

The first Canberra bombing in support of ground forces on Operation Cauldron took place when 13 Troop contacted a large group of the enemy in the Zambesi Valley and air support was called for. The Canberra bombing run, with due respect to the Blues, was off target and many of the bombs landed in and amongst 13 Troop on the ground. Fortunately no serious casualties were taken, but the bombs depicted on the troop flag were a reminder to all of the incident – in particular to 5 Squadron!

14 Troop Flag

Always the naughty boys of the commando, the troop had during the time of the 'flag craze' a most notorious poacher as their OC. For his sake he shall remain nameless, but 14 Troop somehow always just managed to avoid being caught -even though they arrived back in Salisbury with the horns of half the kudu population tied to their vehicles! Thus 'the poachers' were given both their name and their flag.

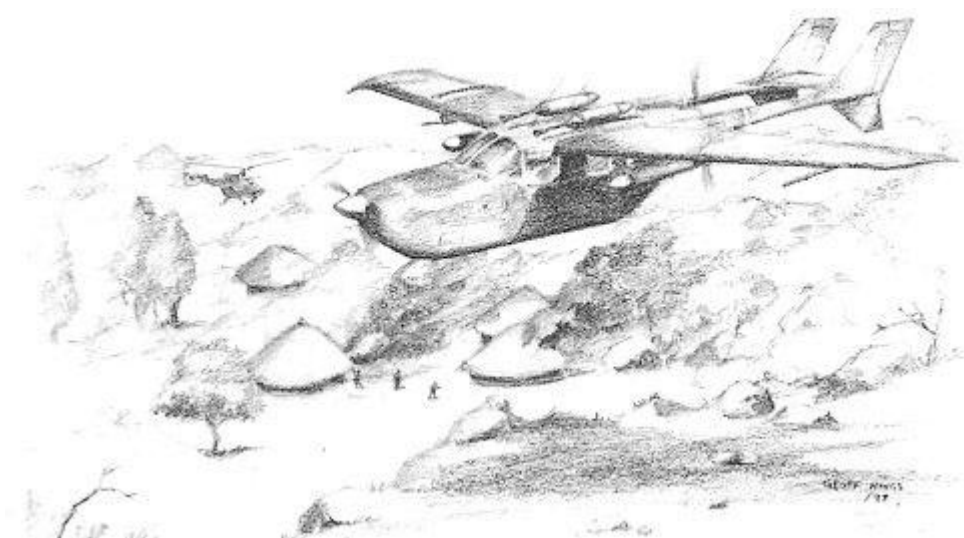


BOOK TWO

1976

INNOCENCE LOST





CHAPTER 5

Early Days – May 1976

W

e were fully-fledged commandos and eager for action. Probably more than anything else we wanted to join the commando, now engaged on fireforce duties at Mount Darwin. We had heard there had been a large guerrilla incursion into the north-east of the country and were worried we were missing out on the action.

Forty of us reported for duty one bleak and windy Monday morning and fell in on the tarmac apron in front of the 3 Commando block at the RLI Barracks. A gigantic corporal told us that the Commando OC, Captain 'Kip' Donald, was on his way back from the bush to give us his welcoming address and our instructions.

Shortly afterwards a Unimog truck came through the gates and pulled up in front of the squad. There were three soldiers on the back of the vehicle. They were draped with machinegun belts and wore a variety of strange headgear, and one of them even had black camouflage cream on his face. They were obviously battle-hardened and looked at us with complete disdain.

They gave us a feeling of helpless inadequacy as we stood there smartly at attention, wearing our berets and brand new stable belts, and we gazed back at them with admiration and considerable awe.

Then a captain wearing a long, brown greatcoat alighted and strode purposefully towards us.

'Commando... Commando shun,' bawled the vast Corporal Hudson, about-turning and saluting smartly.

We were not used to being addressed as 'Commando'. Even so we managed to come to attention in perfect unison.

Captain Donald looked us over briefly. He appeared to be in his early thirties, affected a dapper moustache and looked every inch a professional

soldier.

‘Stand at ease,’ he said. ‘Welcome to the commando. I’d just like to say I hope I will be pleased to have you all serving under me. However you will not be going to the bush for a week or so. You will be performing funeral duties for the late Captain Pitch who died of his wounds yesterday. That’ll be all, thank you, corporal.’

We watched him walk away, bitterly disappointed we weren’t going to the bush immediately... and even more dismayed we were to be kept back for funeral drill.

‘This is really charming,’ moaned Scott. ‘With all the bloody drill we’re going to get rammed down our throats, it’ll be like being back in Training Troop.’

‘Ja, and we’ll still have inspection every morning,’ complained Berry.

‘It’s no use whinging,’ interrupted Corporal Hudson, more generally known as Corporal ‘Pudding’, ‘it would be pointless bringing blokes back from the bush when you lot are already here.’

‘Ja, but corporal, we wanna get to the bush and fight some gooks,’ chipped in the disappointed Peebles.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll soon see plenty of action,’ Pudding chuckled, ‘probably more than you bloody well want. Anyway, you’re lucky. At least you can get out at nights and hit the town. Just remember that roll call is at 0600hrs. and I don’t expect anybody to be late for parade or drunk.’

I was assigned to the escort party for the funeral, which meant a great deal of strenuous drill. We also spent long periods standing to attention on the parade ground while the coffin-bearers and firing party rehearsed the funeral routine.

None of us had known Captain Pitch, so it was an unemotional experience which didn’t help either. His death though, was a timely reminder that it was no longer a game. It was suddenly for real – but it wouldn’t happen to us – would it?

On the second night some of us decided to visit Club Tomorrow in town. It was popular with the RLI and had been one of our favourite haunts in our Training Troop days. The smoky nightclub was already jammed with people, but nonetheless we pushed and elbowed our way in.

After all we were commandos of the RLI. We could afford to be arrogant.

The evening passed slowly as we vainly sought unattached girls. But we were out of luck. While there were certainly plenty of them in the nightclub they appeared to prefer longer haired civilians to us convict-cropped soldiers just out of recruit course.

Disappointed, we could do nothing but drink, and while the band played Average White Band and the Doobie Brothers louder and louder, the evening wore on and we got drunker and drunker. Through an alcoholic haze I vaguely recall seeing Scott and Condon, both as drunk as I was, picking a fight with an off-duty member of the South African Police. There was a brief altercation and the South African, by now bleeding and somewhat battered, escaped to the street and collapsed there on the pavement.

As luck would have it – or wouldn't have it, just at that moment two trucks stopped outside the club. No less than fifty off-duty South African policemen clambered out, and after rescuing their battered comrade angrily set out to discover his assailants.... Although I didn't know it at the time they were the last contingent of South Africans in the process of being withdrawn from Rhodesia. (Officially the SAP had all left in 1975).

I was still slumped in my chair, regarding life through a rosy haze, trying to assess whether I would vomit or pass out – or both, but even so I could see that the RLI men were hopelessly outnumbered. I remember watching Scott being badly mauled too. But by now I was beyond caring and the next thing I remember was Fletcher shaking my shoulder. That was three hours later.

'Come on Chris, wake up. We've got to get back to camp.'

'Where am I?... What's happened?'

The smoky nightclub was almost empty, the band was packing up for the night and all the lights were on. Everything looked awful as Fletcher pulled me to my feet and guided me to a waiting taxi.

The lads had been badly outclassed, and although they had tried to escape they had all been brought to book. The slowest got it in the nightclub, others were dragged from the bushes in nearby Cecil Square and the rest were caught in the street or in the sanitary lanes where they had hidden, hoping to remain undiscovered.

We made a sorry sight on muster parade the next morning. Scott, Condon, Peebles, Lieberman and Brown all sported black eyes. Added to this was a goodly collection of broken noses, crushed ribs and an interesting

variety of cuts and bruises. Corporal Pudding laughed hysterically at the plight of my comrades as they marched painfully on to parade for the final rehearsal. I was only thankful I had. passed out and thus had escaped the same fate.

Captain Pitch was buried at Warren Hills Cemetery with full military honours. There were forty troops in the funeral complement. I remember the considerable discomfort we suffered in the Escort Party as we adopted the 'Rest on your arms reverse' position for over an hour in the blazing sun whilst the service was in progress. (It was a Jewish funeral). Heads bowed, with our chins on our chests and the muzzles of our rifles boring into our feet through the toecaps of our boots. Why in the hell did this guy have to go and get himself killed?

A uniform sigh whispered through the ranks as the Last Post sounded.

Two days later we were on the backs of camouflaged trucks bound for Mount Darwin. A short, balding, unshaven trooper in his mid twenties, Trooper Warren, sat atop the cab of the vehicle. He was wearing a greatcoat and his combat cap had had the back flap cut off and squashed down at the peak. It gave him the appearance of a Confederate soldier. He was clearly a veteran.

'Listen, you fucking rookies,' he snarled, 'we're going to the bush, so you all better switch on and do as you're told. I will tell you when to cock your weapons – and God help you if there are any ADs. Understand?'

We nodded meekly We certainly didn't want to displease this man. It would be some time before the older soldiers stopped calling us rookies, a practice we found humiliating.

Mount Darwin was the operations centre for the Operation Hurricane theatre of war in the north-east of Rhodesia. It was a small village, its dusty streets lined with Greek and Indian stores and bazaars. The pace of life at Mount Darwin was slow, despite the fact that recently tarred roads had been laid, barrack blocks built, and the arrival of the military which had more than trebled its population.

We gingerly unloaded our weapons as our vehicles rolled into the 3 Commando camp. The Commando Sergeant Major was waiting there, and it didn't take him long before he was shouting and screaming at us. It was as if he personally disliked us all immediately.

A large ox of a man, a South African named Corporal Marais, led us to the corrugated-iron barrack room housing 11 Troop.

‘Right you fucking rookies,’ he said, ‘find a possey to doss, but don’t cause any crap and disturb the other ouens.’

The older soldiers eyed us sardonically, as if we were trespassing on their territory. They were lounging on beds and stretchers, playing cards and reading. I looked for a space for my sleeping-bag. But there was no room in the barrack room so Peebles and I were shown to a tent by a bewhiskered corporal from Yorkshire who gave his name as Bob Smith... This at least gave us some privacy and removed us from the bullying that had already begun in the barrack room and we counted ourselves fortunate.

Peebles and I settled in and without wanting to attract any attention from the CSM or the NCOs began to suss out the camp and the routine. It seemed there had been a kill in guerrilla activity in the region over the past few days so we found ourselves assigned to menial camp tasks – filling sandbags, latrine duties and the like. It was very frustrating – when would we ever see any action?

Marius Marais, who was six foot four and weighed two hundred and sixty pounds, was a gentle Afrikaner.

We didn’t think so though, not when we first arrived in the commando. Marais was the 11 Troop Corporal and it seemed plain to us ‘fresh poes’ that he personally encouraged the bullying and intimidation conducted by the older troopies. It seemed to us we had merely exchanged one tyrant for another – CSM Moose for Corporal Marais.

‘Fockin fresh poes,’ he would growl gutturally, ‘it’s only cos I’m too fockin’ idle that I won’t fock you up this time.’

His favourite victims were Berry and Peebles who were both small in stature. Grasping Berry’s left ear with one hand and Peebles’ right ear with the other, Marius would slowly elevate the two wincing unfortunates into a precarious tiptoe position and leer, You little cunts thinks I’m stupid, isn’t it?’

The squirming, squealing victims denied this vehemently.

‘Never corp. Never!’ they howled as Marais clanged their’ skulls together and dropped them unceremoniously.

Scott, always with a ready wit, unwisely decided one evening in Mt. Darwin to prove our feelings about Marais conclusively one way or the

other. He sauntered up to the bed where the giant corporal lay, studiously reading an 'Archie' comic, and coughed to gain his attention.

'Excuse me corp, but Peebles and Berry asked me to tell you that you are a stupid cunt.'

The barrack room was enveloped in a stunning shroud of silence, broken only by Marais' involuntary and immediate shredding of the 'Archie' comic.

Peebles and Berry glowered at Scott and made plans to leave the room quietly, and Marais' eyes narrowed to slits as he started heaving and breathing deeply... It was quite plain to everyone that extra oxygen was required to galvanise his thought process into action. The silence in the room deepened... Whose ears were going to be unhinged? Scott's, or the ears of Berry and Peebles who were by now very close to the door? It was just as Berry's hand reached for the door handle that Marais leaped up, and like a monstrous bear latched firmly onto Scott's left ear.

'You snivelling little dog turd,' he breathed with a hint of a smile, 'I'm not fockin' stupid – and don't go telling tales like a fockin girl guide!'

With a flourish he twisted Scott's ear in a 360 degree turn then disdainfully hurled him moaning to the ground. 'Take six extra guard duties for insubordination,' he added as an afterthought.

Justice had been done – and perhaps Marais wasn't so stupid after all.

Corporal Marais had a very bad sense of direction. I well remember once on night patrol in the Kandeya Tribal Trust Land of Mt. Darwin, walking around the same six-acre mealie field no less than five times. Because it was full moon, after the first circuit I was fairly certain that after the second time round he would recognise the same broken-down plough next to the same broken-down gate.

But he didn't – and as none of us wanted extra guard duties or sore ears we kept quiet.

An hour and five circuits later he suddenly crouched and signalled the rest of the stick into all-round defence. Dutifully we crouched, and waited as Marius noisily whipped out his 1:50 000 map and summoned Gamett to assist.

'Where the fock are we?' came a loud whisper audible to everyone.

Gamett prodded the map. 'There'.

Can't be. We've walked for over an hour'

‘Promise corp, we’re here. Check that gomo there – that’s the one on the map.’ ‘Praat kak, it’s that one.’

Gamett sighed. He didn’t know whether to argue and thereby run the risk of Marius assuming that argument was an insult to his intelligence – or worse, his honour, or to concede and thereby allow us to become totally lost.

Somehow he must have managed to steer a precarious middle course, for half an hour later the conference was over. The whispering stopped and the patrol continued ... with Marius’ leadership abilities and pride miraculously still intact.

Guiding a helicopter onto a ground position is not always an easy task – particularly in the heat of battle when there are several choppers all buzzing around in the vicinity. Chopper pilots naturally got ratty when the stick leader on the ground botched up the directions and as a result had the helicopter buzzing aimlessly around the sky, a prime target for enemy fire.

Now the instructions the stick leader should give the pilot are relatively simple... Go left... Go right... Straighten out... I am directly 200 metres to your front. Or... I am 100 metres to your 3 o’clock.

And the chopper pilot replies, ‘Roger Stop Three, I have you visual,’ or simply ‘Roger, I have you.’

It sounds simple, but I quickly learnt that the trick is being able to equate your left to the pilot’s right and vice versa. Marais couldn’t do this, in consequence infuriating dozens of chopper pilots, and one such occasion I shall never forget.

‘Good heavens Stop Three, where in the fuck are you?’

‘Yellow Three, go right – go right.’

‘I AM going right, for Christ’s sake, I’ve been going right for TEN minutes!’

By now the chopper was merely a faint whirr in the distance and I looked at Marais, who appeared quite unfazed. I wondered whether the pilot would simply give up and go home in a fit of pique. It’s what I would have done.

But Marais wouldn’t give up.

Yellow Three, Stop Three.’

‘Go, Stop Three. Can we try and get it right this time?’ The pilot’s voice sounded very resigned. ‘Give me a feature and I’ll try and find you.’

‘Ja, no problem. We’re directly under that helluva big white cloud.’

The handset went dead and there were no longer any sounds of the helicopter.

He'd been obliged to return to base to refuel. But he did come back, and this time found us almost immediately... Gamett had suggested to Marais that he throw a smoke grenade.

During periods of inaction on fireforce duties troop corporals were responsible for retraining and for lectures. Marius was delighted because in lecture periods he had a captive audience, and he went to great lengths to organise the blackboard and the benches outside the barrack room where he would present his lecture.

This particular day his lecture was on tire Icarus rocket, and we all sat down and peered at the blackboard. But unfortunately we were blinded by the sun that was shining directly onto the board. After trying to force us to see what was on the board Marais eventually agreed that there was a problem, and the practical solution seemed to be for us to all turn around and for Marius to move the blackboard to the other end of the 'class' away from the sun.

But no, Marius thought we were up to tricks and insisted we move all the benches around to the other side of the blackboard... Why should he move? He was the corporal.

We finally succumbed to this logic and rearranged the benches, and the lecture went on.

Five minutes later, to illustrate the point he was making, our instructor clasped the Icarus rocket in his left hand and waved it at us – and inadvertently pulled the release cord. The missile leaped from its casing in a loud 'whoosh' and snaked down the aisle of benches at a frightening speed, only a few inches above ground level.

Watching entranced, we saw the projectile guide itself malevolently towards two passing trackers and their attendant German Shepherd, and pass directly between the animal's legs. As the two trackers dived for cover and the terrified dog fled wildly towards the canteen with its leash flailing in the wind, the Icarus finally embedded itself harmlessly into the side of a bunker. We all rolled around hysterically and Marius looked very sheepish... and the lecture was adjourned.

And that was Marais. Despite everything Corporal Marais had a big heart – but he never failed to terrify us in those early days.

He was killed in a car crash soon after the war.

A most flamboyant character in the commando was Dave Simpson. Born in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, he was a born orator and a master of self-invented slang. A soldier people loved to hate – particularly the officers – Simpson also had the habit of adding ‘ah’ to the end of nearly every sentence he uttered.

On that first day in the bush with the commando, Goss Condon and I decided to take a shower. The shower-block was deserted save for Simpson, who was reclining languidly on a bench inspecting his penis and looking for all the world like some kind of Adonis awaiting the coming of his Diana.

We stripped off silently and respectfully for we were, we thought, in the presence of a veteran.

Little did we know he had only been in the army a short while longer than us and prior to our arrival had been acting as the dhobi wallah for 14 Troop, collecting and delivering the troops’ laundry on a daily basis.

He was singing lustily as we nervously stepped into the showers alongside of him.

‘What you fuckin fresh puss doing here-ah?’

He nakedly assumed an aggressive stance, grasping the shower rose above him.

‘Er, we’ve just come to have a shower, er...’ I didn’t know by what rank to address him so decided to leave it at that.

He ignored the reply and craned his head forward, as if earnestly trying to give advice.

‘D’you see this?’ he said, letting go of his Tarzan grip on the shower rose and grasping his penis with both hands. ‘This prick’s fucked more chicks than you okes have had hot breakfasts-ah!’

He stood back, flexing, to let the immensity of his statement sink in, and feeling embarrassed, Condon and I eyed each other. We didn’t quite know what to make of him.

This was the first and last time we let him get away with it. After that we constantly challenged his outrageous claims and on numerous occasions the banter would develop into rowdy physical battles, generally with Simpson seeing the rough end. But this did not dampen his spirits and he continued to boast and taunt and criticise. Despite this though, we eventually became firm friends.

Discipline was harsh and CSM Fraser liberally distributed charges and extra guard duties.

During the second week of the tour I went down with fever. I'm not certain what it was but I believe it must have been malaria.

'For Christ's sake, Chris,' urged Berry, 'you're bloody sick. Why don't you go and see the Doc?'

'I can't. He'll think I'm a malingerer.'

Berry and Peebles, who had been covering for me on muster parades and at PT, were on the horns of a dilemma. They understandably were worried they would be caught out and eventually reported my predicament to Corporal Smith. He fortunately was reasonably sympathetic and excused me from the more strenuous duties. But I was not excused guard duties as this needed the approval of the CSM – and we were too terrified to approach him.

One night at about 2100hrs. as I lay delirious, restless and sweating in my sleeping-bag, my half-sleep was disturbed by the entrance of the sergeant major.

Cocks, what the hell is going on here?' he asked angrily. He shone his torch in my face.

I made a feeble attempt to rise but couldn't. I'm sick, sir,' I gasped lamely. The CSM studied me closely and after a while grudgingly concluded I was telling the truth.

'Be that as it may I have just caught Berry performing your guard duty, and no one is allowed to change duties without my permission.' 'Sir.'

'Both of you are to report to my office after muster parade tomorrow.'

'Sir.'

He left me to my misery, wondering what punishment we would have to face.

The next morning we reported to the CSM's office where we were duly charged. Ten minutes later we were in front of Captain Donald who reprimanded us sternly and awarded each of us ten days extra guard duties. I apologised to Berry and thanked him for helping me out. He was a true friend and I would gladly have volunteered to perform his extra guard duties for him. But the risk of us being caught out a second time was too great.

Gradually the attitude of the older soldiers began to soften and three of them became my good friends. Although he was the same age as me Trevor

Schoultz had been in the army for more than a year. His mother was dead and his father was an alcoholic, so the army had seemed the only career option open to him.

Charlie Norris was also my age and I was staggered to discover he had just been appointed a stick leader – not only because he looked so young and boyish, but also because he had recently finished twenty-eight days in the Detention Barracks at Brady Barracks in Bulawayo.

This was amazing – how could a ‘gaol-bird’ be considered as suitable stick leader material?

But it did not take me long to discover that the army judged a man not by his past but by his worth. Occasionally later during my service I even wondered if a man was considered worthy until he had completed a spell in DB. Charlie, also the product of a broken home, had joined the army as a boy soldier at the age of sixteen.

Two years later he would save my life, and to this day we are still firm friends.

After six years in the RLI Charlie finally ended up as a captain and the adjutant of 1 Commando Battalion, the regiment formed from an amalgamation of black Rhodesian Army troops and ex-guerrillas after the RLI was disbanded in 1980.

Peter Garnett, the third of my friends, also was my age and a stick leader. We used to spend many hours playing cards together. Short and stocky, somewhat of a loner and at times unreachable, Pete was destined to be killed in action a year later.

My heart raced when the siren sounded.

We dropped what we were doing, grabbed our webbing and rifles and dashed for the helicopter pad.

The CSM was shouting amidst the seeming chaos.

‘Stops One, Two and Three to the chopper pad – this minute! Second wave to stand by’

Troops were rushing this way and that and in a moment of panic I thought I had lost my stick leader, Corporal Seward, who was an Australian. When I found him he was remarkably unruffled, and I followed him to the chopper pad fervently hoping I hadn’t forgotten anything.

The CSM was still shouting.

‘Loader, don’t forget your webbing... Peebles, where’s your bloody sleeping-bag?’

He certainly had an eye for detail, and in a way I suppose we were thankful to him in spite of all his discipline. His job was to turn us into real soldiers – and he was doing it.

The chopper pilot gave a thumbs-up signal and crouching low we boarded the screaming machine, weapons at the trail, muzzles to the rear. That first day I was more afraid of not doing the ‘right thing’ than of any guerrillas we were likely to encounter and I prayed I wouldn’t forget the drills we had learnt in Training Troop. Keep your dressing... Keep your distance and don’t bunch up... Look to the stick leader for commands... When the stick stops, crouch and go into all-round defence... And at all times, ‘switch on... you’re in the bush’.

The helicopter was quickly airborne, and turning north we flew over the Dotito hills. The doors as was customary had been removed and an exhilarating wind buffeted us where we sat strapped into our seats. Not long after this tire practice of strapping in was abandoned and the seat belts dispensed with. They only got in the way. Glancing down I saw scattered kraals and tiny tribesmen cultivating minute fields... Few even bothered to look up as we passed overhead.

The burly rifleman next to me leaned over and shouted in my ear to make himself heard above the noise of the engine.

‘Aren’t you scared?’

I shook my head. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘I am,’ he confided, licking his lips. I’m always scared when going into a contact.’

I was astounded. I had never heard the like before – a commando actually confessing he was frightened! I couldn’t believe it.

I still had a lot to learn.

As we approached the contact zone the helicopters dropped away until they were skirting the trees while the pilots looked for suitable LZs. High above us the K-car with Captain Donald aboard was directing the operation. Orbiting at an even higher altitude was the Lynx.

Our pilot touched down with a slight bump and we immediately deplaned, spilling out and darting for the nearest cover as we had been taught. Seconds later the helicopter was airborne again, its rotating blades showering us with a whirlwind of dust and leaves.

What happens now?

Corporal Seward was crouching, transmitting on his radio as I strained my eyes, peering into the thick bush surrounding us. The corporal signalled and somewhat uncertainly I took him to mean we were to advance in an extended line.

We picked our way through the clawing thorn bush and I was hard pressed keeping my position. I was terrified I would move too far ahead of the rest or that I would get lost.

Was I doing everything right?

The bush around us suddenly emptied in gunfire.

Who was doing the shooting?.....Where was it coming from?

The machinegunner to my left dropped behind cover and began firing to his front. At what?

I stood there in a daze, bewildered and completely confused. Bullets, or what I presumed were bullets, ripped through the foliage above me and it took me a ridiculously long time to realise I was being shot at.

When I did so I dropped to the ground and crawled into a shallow spruit. Then I cautiously poked my head over the bank and attempted to assess where the firing was coming from. But learning nothing I just aimed my rifle to the front. I had never fired a rifle in anger before and suddenly I began to wonder.

Was I allowed to open fire?

They won't think I'm wasting ammunition, will they?

Will they shout at me if I shoot? Will I be charged?

I pondered these weighty questions and eventually decided to fire. I squeezed the trigger nervously and the shot rang out. To my relief I found that no one had objected. Still worried I glanced to my left at the MAG gunner. He was firing furiously and taking absolutely no notice of me. So I decided I should carry on. Feeling much better I squeezed the trigger again – and again, oblivious of the intense din that was exploding in my ears.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the firing ceased.

We withdrew a hundred metres or so and I wondered what was going on. 'What's happening?' I asked the burly rifleman next to me.

'The Lynx is going in for a strike. We must find some good cover and keep our heads down.'

We ducked behind the shelter of some rocks and waited. Shortly afterwards there was the roar of an aircraft approaching to our front. It flew

across the front of our position at treetop level, reminding me somehow of a large, grey shark sliding in for an attack. Two bombs hurtled earthwards and detonated in a brilliant explosion in front of us. I felt myself wince involuntarily.

Immediately afterwards we stood up and resumed sweeping towards the contact area. Gelatinous embryo-like lumps were burning as we advanced across the green veld.

Corporal Seward spotted what looked to me like a bundle of rags beneath a bush. In an instant his rifle was at his shoulder and he fired three shots. The bundle grunted, and as it rolled over a Communist AK-47 rifle clattered to the side.

I was astonished. So that was a guerrilla... The bundle had seemed so inoffensive. I studied the body curiously.

Still smouldering napalm had bored ugly holes into the flesh which gave off a sickly sweet smell. The skull had been shattered by a bullet and brains were oozing through the scalp in a riot of blood and plasma. The mouth was fixed in a grimace of death while the eyes stared upward as if in a trance.

So this was death.

It was gruesome. It was messy.

I suddenly wondered if RLI soldiers looked the same when they were killed.

The sweep carried on and we discovered three more bodies.

I soon learned the practice of immediately shooting at anything suspicious, regardless of whether it was obviously dead or not.

If in doubt, shoot. That was the way you stayed alive.

The operation drew to a close and the other sticks converged on our position. The next job was to drag the bodies to a central LZ. From there they'd be uplifted by helicopter, suspended in a big net beneath and flown back to Special Branch in Mount Darwin for identification.

I watched in amazement as the more experienced soldiers searched the bodies. They were looting the dead! Like common thieves!

Prize takings were wristwatches and money and these were swiftly pocketed. Transistor radios were another bonus – some were almost new and had probably been stolen from a rural store – and money was divided up equally amongst the stick members. I soon learned that it was every soldier's dream was to kill a guerrilla paymaster. We all had heard fantastic

tales of troopers killing such prizes and discovering thousands of dollars on the corpses.

Initially I was reluctant to handle the bodies – it seemed so obscene. But when we were ordered to drag them to the LZ I had no option. I grabbed a pair of ankles and attempted to tug an obstinate corpse from the rocks. But its arm had become entangled in a protruding root and I winced as the burly rifleman gave the offending limb a jarring kick which freed it.

The head of the guerrilla continually banged against the ground as we dragged the body to the LZ, leaving a swath of bloodied, flattened grass.

We too suffered casualties and many of my intake were wounded on that first bush trip, probably due to their inexperience. Kim Goodson was grievously wounded. A few short months out of Northern Ireland, Sammy Beahan was shot in the chest. Kevin Rhodes of 11 Troop was partially blind in his left eye, a fact missed by the medical examiners, and during an early contact he failed to see a guerrilla hiding in cover on his left flank. Badly shot up, he was lucky to survive. The burly rifleman deserted a few weeks later.

As time passed and we became more useful, our superiors began to accept us. Even our Troop Officer, Lieutenant Smith, became a lot more amicable.

He was a decent sort and encouraged morale and team spirit by regularly organising drinking sessions around the camp fire. I admired him for preferring to sit around a fire with his troops instead of indulging in the comforts of the Officers' Mess.

The lieutenant also knew all the battalion songs and could entertain us for hours with his singing and bawdy jokes. I had brought my guitar along, and as he regarded this as a boon for the troop. I was regularly ordered to play.

One of my favourites was sung to the tune of 'Lili Marlene'.

*Riding down to Salisbury, ninety miles an hour,
We are the boys from the RLI, we are a fucking shower.
We can't change up and we can't change down,
The gearbox is in but upside down.
We are the boys from the RLI,
We are a fucking shower!*

It was songs like this that gradually instilled in us a feeling of belonging and camaraderie. The bureaucracy, red tape and hard discipline would never stop, yet that has mellowed in my memory. The songs though, I will never forget. One was sung to the tune of ‘Galway Bay’.

*If you ever go across the sea to Rhodesia
Or stand there at the foot of Rhodes’ grave,
Or farther north to a place called “Bamba Zonke”,
There live the men who wear the green beret.
Our playground is the great Zambesi Valley,
Our colours By for all the world to see.
They ban us from their nightclubs and their parties –
We are the men who wear the tartan green.*

I also soon learned that almost all of the veterans smoked dope. I used to wonder curiously why I’d often spy Schoultz, Garnett and Norris wandering nonchalantly over to one of the bunkers at unusual times. They would emerge several minutes later with glassy eyes and in good spirits. At first I was shattered at the risks they were taking – how brazen could you get? One evening whilst I was on guard duty in the corner bunker, the three veterans walked into the bunker and ignoring me, lit up a joint. Coughing and spluttering as he tried to hold in the smoke, Schoultz passed the reefer to me as if I’d been doing it all my life. I took it.

Without really appreciating it, the frequency of contacts began to increase. I began to feel more confident. I was learning what the form was and perhaps now could start concentrating on the enemy and less on my stick leader. The RLI and especially 3 Commando bore the brunt of ZANLA’s winter offensive in 1976. In our first six-week bush trip the commando killed sixty-three enemy guerrillas.

This was a record in the Rhodesian Army at the time. But it was soon broken as hostilities began to escalate. Unknown to us, the war had begun to spread like wildfire throughout the country. This was the start of the deluge. As the war intensified so too did the Rhodesians’ fixation with kill rates and body counts. As in Vietnam. Times were about to become much harder and there were more desertions.



CHAPTER 6

Gona-Re-Zhou – Winter 1976

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he Gona-Re-Zhou is the name of a vast game reserve situated in the south-eastern corner of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. It means ‘place of the elephants’. Its eastern boundary forms part of the border with Moçambique and generally, being lowveld, the terrain is flat and parched. Along the banks of the Lundi and Nuanetsi rivers however, the main arteries through the game reserve, the foliage is lush and thick with buffalo grass and majestic mahogany trees.

But in the dry season both rivers stop flowing, to become necklaces of stagnant pools. It is there that the herds of game come to drink and wallow. This harshly beautiful place apparently treated the guerrillas badly and we had heard stories of guerrillas infiltrating the country there who had died of starvation and thirst. That is the reason why – there were no inhabitants in the area to offer them succour -the guerrillas main infiltration routes were in fact maintained through the adjoining tribal areas.

We didn’t know this in 1976 which was why the entire commando was despatched there to patrol the game reserve and search for guerrilla entry points into the country.

We stopped at a place called Fishans on the banks of the Lundi. Apart from massive Natal mahoganies and countless mopani trees there was absolutely nothing there.

Schoultz and I were soon ensconced in a comfortable bivouac. It helped to have an older soldier as a bivvy partner for he knew all the tricks. He had wheedled a tent out of the Commando Quartermaster, as well as stretchers and other comforts.

Until the troops were given their patrol assignments we were subjected to the discipline of tediously strict camp routine. There was a muster parade

every morning, followed by pokey drill and exercises.

After that followed a sweep through the camp to pick up litter, and the corporals following us in the rear never failed to notice even the tiniest piece of litter the sweep line had missed.

‘Hey, L-Loader,’ called Corporal Hughes who stammered, ‘you’ve missed this b-bit of paper. Come back and p-pick it up.’

Loader turned slowly and trundled back to the corporal. He studied the offending object for a moment.

‘That’s not litter, corp. That’s a leaf.’

Hughes bent down to examine it more closely.

It’s a p-piece of brown p-paper,’ he pronounced after a while. ‘Now p-pick it up.’

Now it was Loader’s turn to bend down and look at the litter.

‘I promise you, corp,’ he said, ‘it’s not litter, it’s a leaf.’

‘Stop arguing, Loader, and fucking p-pick it up.’

Yes, corp,’ replied Loader and reluctantly bent down and retrieved the leaf.

After the sweep came the ritual of filling sandbags, digging shell scrapes and weapon training. We were only too pleased when we were given a warning order we were to go on a patrol. The mercurial Trevor Schoultz however had other ideas and he somehow managed to persuade the commando signaller, Corporal “TC Van Rooyen, that we were the ideal pair to operate the radio relay station – while the others tramped through the bush.

The OC called us to his tent and briefed us to ready ourselves to man a relay station he wanted mounted on top of the impressive Chilojo cliffs overlooking the Lundi River.

What a pleasure! Sitting on top of a mountain, far away from the CSM and with no one telling us what to do. Even better – no walking... no physical work.

A Unimog truck carted us and our provisions as far up the rising slopes of Chilojo as was possible. Then from the drop-off point we had to ferry everything up to the summit ourselves. It was back-breaking work, but after two hours we were done. Jerry-cans of water, sufficient for two weeks, boxes and boxes of rat-packs, a large tarpaulin to act as a tent, stretchers, gas cylinders, the large TR48 radio with its nicad batteries and aerials and two smaller A63 radios with a large supply of disposable batteries.

We had to keep radio watch for twenty-four hours a day, and at night or when we slept we turned the volume control to full so we wouldn't miss a call.

We soon worked out the busy times however.

Most sticks radioed in their sticks during the morning between 0600hrs. And 0700hrs. and in the evenings between 1700hrs. and 1800hrs. and at these times we were kept busy relaying messages to and from the base to the men in the field. But for the rest of the day we were relatively free to do as we pleased.

The evening was the most pleasurable time and we used to sit entranced, watching the breathtaking African sunsets, in no small way enhanced by the effects of a cob of dope. Schoultz would then build a fire, saying it was to keep off marauding lions.

After that we'd settle down to cook the evening meal, which was invariably a feast as Schoultz was something of a culinary expert when it came to uninteresting army rations. We had, of course, brought along some beers and it was a pleasure to sit around the camp fire, drinking and exchanging stories until well into the night. Altogether we really enjoyed our time there and it was with a distinct feeling of regret that we were relieved after two weeks.

Immediately after my return to camp I was assigned to a patrol led by Charlie Norris, who was shortly to be promoted to lance corporal. Our mission seemed rather vague at the time. Eight of us under Charlie's command were to proceed in two trucks to a place just upstream of the Sabi and Lundi confluence. Once there we were to base up and operate small patrols on foot along the riverline.

I'm still not too sure what we were looking for but at the time I presumed it was guerrilla camps, crossing points, trails and so on.

Charlie and a few others went on a recce, returning after a while to say they had found a lekker possey where we could base up. It was as they had described, a secure and shady glade surrounded by tropical verdure. It seemed a veritable paradise to us and in our inexperience we took little notice of a large, well-used game trail leading to the water's edge that passed right through the clearing.

We parked the trucks in parallel and unpacked our necessities, and Charlie, who was conscientious, ordered us to dig shell scrapes, this time a simple task because of the cool, friable earth that made the glade's floor.

Beers were allowed at night because we were classified as a base camp. Certainly nobody had told us otherwise, and all in all it was an ideal situation.

The only problem was the wild animals. Basing up on a game trail we discovered hadn't been so clever after all. One night while on guard duty I heard the heavy rusting and shuffling of what seemed to be a number of animals nearby in the long grass. And whatever they were, they were coming towards us.

'Wake up, Charlie,' I whispered, 'I think we might have a herd of elephant coming to pay a visit.'

Charlie awakened with a start.

Christ, they're almost on top of us! Quickly wake up the rest of the ouens and let's get under the trucks.'

There was a flurry as the men woke up, assessed the problem and quickly burrowed beneath the vehicles, dragging their sleeping-bags and rifles with them. Just in the nick of time. A small herd of elephants lumbered into the camp and we shrank farther beneath the trucks as they milled around the vehicles, sniffing curiously and snorting. I remember being surprised at how silently they moved despite their great bulks.

'Oh, Jesus,' said one trooper.

'Ssh, keep quiet!'

The great beasts began investigating the backs of the trucks where most of our provisions were still stored. The trunks wafted and sniffed around. A crate of Cokes and a sack of potatoes were picked up, examined and flung noisily to the ground. Sometimes a trunk wandered down to ground level, inquisitively sniffing us out, and we endeavoured to make ourselves as small as possible.

Then came some moments of excited activity when they discovered two pockets of oranges. This was an unexpected treat and they dragged them out and guzzled them all before finally continuing their journey into the bush.

The following night a rhino paid us a visit. But fortunately he didn't stop for long, and after this we took to sleeping beneath the trucks permanently. The hyenas proved a sinister menace with their prowlings and we would happily have shot them except this would have compromised our position. Lions too, came close every night and their chilling whoops and throaty roars put the fear of God into us.

Nevertheless, apart from the animals it was an enjoyable period though not exactly productive. By the time this Gona-Re-Zhou bush trip ended, the commando as a whole had quartered hundreds of square kilometres on foot... and in its attempt to find the enemy had met with not a single guerrilla – nor seen any trace. I subconsciously began to wonder about the efficiency of our intelligence.



CHAPTER 7

Honde Valley – Winter 1976

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rom the Lowveld we were ordered to the Inyanga highlands, some five hundred kilometres to the north. There had been a major ZANLA guerrilla incursion from Moçambique into the densely populated Honde Valley, and the High Command had decided to saturate the valley with troops.

The journey over the Sabi River, then up towards the Middle Sabi area of Rhodesia, took us over some of the worst roads we had so far encountered. The powdery dust churned up by the convoy vehicles on the dirt roads choked and almost suffocated us, and as it was mid-winter it was intensely cold at night.

We stopped only to refuel at lonely military outposts and, now and then, we were given the opportunity to brew up the occasional pot of tea or heat a can of pilchards. For two long nights we remained on the road and were refused permission to sleep because of fear of ambush. Like zombies we huddled into our greatcoats, trying unsuccessfully to keep out the bitter cold.

Exhausted, cold and hungry we eventually arrived at our destination, a bleak windswept plateau from which the waters of the Mtarazi Falls plummeted down into the Honde Valley below. We were too tired even to erect bivouacs and after a hot meal of stew and dumplings prepared by the cooks, most of us gratefully collapsed into our sleeping-bags and slept. The temperature was below zero, and when I woke up in the morning after having spent an exceedingly uncomfortable night, I found my sleeping-bag was covered with a layer of ice.

Half of the commando was to base up on suitable OPs along the escarpment. The rest would patrol the valley floor, ready to react to any guerrilla sightings reported by the OPs. It seemed a sound enough strategy

and I was pleased to be in Corporal Percy Hodgson's stick, which was going on an OP.

Percy was a short, wiry veteran with sparkling blue eyes and we looked up to him as the epitome of a professional soldier. Totally dedicated and efficient, he was a supreme individualist and a perfectionist in the bush.

The descent down the tricky path to the OP proved arduous and it was three hours before we emerged on to the rolling downs overlooking the kraals below.

The OP position on the top of a protruding spur gave an excellent field-vision and was ideal. Conforming to normal procedure we based up about twenty paces to the rear of the actual OP where we were allocated places to sleep in an all-round defensive position. The stick leader slept in the centre of the group to facilitate the giving of orders in an emergency. There was always at least one man on the OP itself, continually scanning the countryside below with binoculars.

It was easy to compromise an OP. Too much movement could do it, or smaller things like a sudden movement or allowing the sun to reflect from a bully beef can.

Although the tribal kraals below were well out of hearing it was essential to maintain silence, for the guerrillas were likely to send mujibas up the slopes under the pretence of herding cattle. But in reality they were looking for Security Force OPs. The mujibas were local children of varying ages who acted very effectively as the eyes and ears of the guerrillas. As they were not armed, to all intents and purposes they were perfectly innocent civilians going about their daily business and this made them difficult to deal with.

I took the first shift and after some time a pattern of village life in the valley began to emerge. It seemed a tranquil enough scene, with cattle grazing in the fields and women washing laundry in the fresh, sparkling streams. While I was watching an old man sitting motionless on a stool outside a hut, I felt a nudge. Peebles had arrived to take over.

'Anything happening?' he whispered.

'Not much. But do you see those women walking up to the kraal over there?' I indicated a cluster of huts to our front on a slight rise.

'You mean those three with buckets on their heads?'

Yes, that's them. They seem to go down to the riverline over there quite a bit. But I lose sight of them in the undergrowth. Keep an eye on

them, okay?’ I handed Peebles the binoculars and crawled back to the rear. Some of the men were asleep and a few were reading.

‘See anything, Chris?’ Percy asked. He didn’t look well and perspiration was beading his forehead.

‘I’m not sure, corp. There were some women carrying water who might be suspicious.’

‘Okay, so long as Peebles knows about it,’ he replied. He was fighting the onset of malaria and by the next day would be suffering heavy bouts of fever and delirium.

We observed the women’s movements closely for three days. They made far too many seemingly unnecessary bips, at unusual times of the day as well, and finally I became convinced they were delivering supplies to a guerrilla camp concealed somewhere in the riverline. What else could it be? I tried to tell the corporal, but by now he was too sick to take much interest.

On the fourth day Peebles and I got our final confirmation. Two women carrying baskets on their heads had disappeared into the undergrowth at about midday. They reappeared approximately an hour later – and they were without their baskets. No one leaves baskets unattended in the bush without a reason. They were feeding guerrillas – I was convinced of it.

Leaving Peebles to man the OP I moved back to tell Corporal Hodgson. Although feverish, this time my sense of urgency got through to him and he accompanied me back to the OP. The women were still visible, walking back towards their kraal. I told him the story, and when I had finished he staggered back to the base area and picked up his radio handset.

‘Three Two Bravo... Three Two Bravo this is Three One Charlie... Do you read?’

After a pause the radio crackled and the voice of Sergeant Taylor came over the set.

‘Three One Charlie this is Three Two Bravo... I have you fives... Go ahead.’ Sergeant Taylor was the 12 Troop Sergeant and had served in the army for many years. His stick was patrolling the valley floor and was acting as our reaction stick.

‘Roger, Three Two Bravo... I have a possible Charlie Tango sighting about one thousand metres due east of my loc... How long will it take you to react?’

‘Copied that... Wait out.’ Sergeant Taylor was obviously studying his map. Two minutes later he was back on the air.

‘Roger, Three One Charlie. I will be in the target area in about figures forty... I will give you a shout when I’m ten minutes out... Over.’

‘Roger... Copied.’

Percy organised us into fire position overlooking the re-entrant to the south of our ridge.

The MAG, operated by Pete Grant, was placed to cover a slippery-looking track that wound up towards the top of the re-entrant. It looked well-used and I wondered why the locals would want to climb such a route. I surmised it must be the escape route for the guerrillas.

We soon began to catch glimpses of the Three Two Bravo stick as they made their way slowly on foot to the target. To us they were dim and distant figures that appeared and disappeared, then appeared again as they crossed a field or a patch of sparse bush.

Forty-five minutes later Sergeant Taylor radioed to say they had located the guerrilla camp and were going in. He suggested to Percy that the track up the re-entrant was almost certainly an escape route and that we should stand by.

We assumed firing positions and waited. Two minutes later Three Two Bravo initiated the contact.

An MAG distantly chattered into life with short bursts and rifle fire emptied in accompaniment. A white phosphorus grenade exploded, rocketing white tails of chemicals above the mat of foliage. We waited patiently, unsure of what was going on.

The firefight lasted for about five minutes, the guerrillas retaliating briefly with a rattle of Communist AK and SKS rifle fire. Then the firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Smoke wafted slowly skyward from the contact area as the radio came to life.

‘Percy, Percy... stand by’ came Sergeant Taylor’s voice, ‘five or six Charlie Tangos heading your way’

‘Copied,’ acknowledged Percy.

He seemed very calm as he waited behind the prone or crouching soldiers, all braced anxiously over their weapons.

‘Wait for my order to fire,’ he hissed.

The noise made by the fleeing guerrillas, as yet unseen, could be heard clearly as they crashed clumsily through the undergrowth, their weapons

clanging unheeded against the rocks.

Six guerrillas suddenly appeared and began scrambling desperately up the treacherous track to the top of the re-entrant. They were unaware that we were at their backs, less than a hundred metres across the re-entrant.

‘Wait,’ breathed Percy. He was waiting for all the guerrillas to get into the killing zone. My trigger finger tightened fractionally, taking up the slack. I breathed in to steady the sights and pulled the butt harder into my shoulder. I had the leading guerrilla in my sights but the barrel was waving as I tried to follow his progress.

‘Wait... wait... FIRE!’

We opened fire, all of us at the same moment. The din was intense but we were possessed to get as many rounds into the killing zone as possible. It only took a few seconds for the guerrillas to suddenly realise they were being shot at again -this time from a totally different position. Our trap was complete and the guerrillas panicked.

They looked around in terror, obviously wondering where the firing was coming from. I was sure I could make out the quizzical look of naked fear on the one man’s face as I flicked a new magazine into my rifle. Realising they could not go back down the hill – into the jaws of Sergeant Taylor’s stick – they began scrambling even more desperately up the slope.

But they had no cover and soon our weapons found the range.

A frantic guerrilla clutched at his thigh as a 7.62mm long found its mark. As he paused the MAG found its range and his body was racked by several more rounds. He tumbled violently down into the jungle below, his body bouncing like a rag doll over the rocks.

‘For Christ’s sake, hit them,’ urged Percy. ‘Shoot straight and fucking HIT them!’

The MAG developed a stoppage and Pete Grant tried desperately to rectify the fault.

‘Sort that gun out,’ the corporal bawled, his eyes wide and inflamed. ‘I don’t want the bastards to get away’

Then another bullet found its mark and a second guerrilla fell stricken into the bush. I was now on my third magazine – or was it my fourth? I had no idea whether my bullets were finding their targets. There was so much noise, so much smoke. I slowed down on my rate of fire, trying deliberately this time to pick out the guerrillas. Another one vanished down the slope – presumably hit.

But somehow the others seemed to be leading charmed lives.

The bullets were striking all around them, some only a few centimetres from their scurrying figures, yet all the time they continued to climb rapidly, crawling and clawing their way up to the safety of the summit.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ screamed Percy desperately, ‘the fuckers are getting away!’

I vaguely registered that the MAG had barked back into life. Grant must have sorted out the fault. The gun raked the slope and the barrage of fire became deafening as we tried still harder to bring them down. One guerrilla was hit in the leg. but he only paused to glance briefly at the wound then dragged himself over the lip of the ridge to safety. The guerrilla following wasn’t so lucky and as he reached the top his head seem to explode and vanish. For a grotesque few moments the rest of the body seemed suspended in time before it toppled gently to the ground.

By then his surviving comrades had long gone, and we ceased firing and glanced nervously at our leader. Our shooting could have been better. There should have been six dead guerrillas lying on the track. But although we had hit four of them, two were only wounded and could well live to fight another day.

Percy said nothing and turned towards his sleeping-bag. His fever had got the better of him. Now the action was over and he collapsed again, exhausted. We were now without a leader, so Smit as the senior trooper took the radio and asked Three Two Bravo to rendezvous with us at our position.

Ten minutes later they hove into view, gasping for breath as they climbed the steep gradient.

It was good to see them.

‘I say chaps,’ shouted Creighton jovially in a mock English accent, ‘isn’t this all jolly good fun eh?’

We laughed.

‘I say, isn’t it just,’ imitated Scott, ‘nothing to beat killing floppies in the sun, hey chaps?’ He and Creighton started singing the commando version of a Leonard Cohen hit song, their arms around each other’s shoulders.

‘Goodbye to you my trusted friends.

We’ve known each other since you were in my sights

I tried to teach you right from wrong...

We had joy, we had fun, killing floppies in the sun...'

'Wind your necks in arseholes,' cut in Smit, 'how d'you know there aren't more of them down there?'

The immediate problem to hand was Corporal Percy Hodgson. We simply could not carry him back up the escarpment, so Sergeant Taylor was finally forced to call in a helicopter to undertake the casevac.

The Alouette soon arrived, not only with Corporal Smith as a replacement for Percy, but with much-appreciated mail for us.

Once we had seen Percy safely away, the two sticks together made a thorough sweep of the contact area. We managed to recover four bodies. However there was ample evidence of wounded guerrillas, for large patches of stained earth indicated where several had been hit and had bled profusely.

With Smit tracking we followed the blood spoor for many kilometres and I was amazed that men could lose so much blood yet still keep on going. We even found a foot, gruesome but intact, that had been neatly severed from the ankle of one of the guerrillas. Still sitting in its shoe.

For the next few weeks we were engaged in a series of running battles with a number of guerrilla gangs, and each time we chased them south along the base of the escarpment. It was frustrating. They had by now split up into smaller parties – they had bombshelled and the contacts we initiated consisted of no more than a few hasty shots fired seemingly uselessly at darting figures.

We claimed no further kills, but at least the evidence of blood spoor remained prolific and showed that not all our shots had been in vain. After one such contact we discovered part of a shattered jaw bone caked with blood, and this gave us heart. If we weren't killing the enemy at least we were maiming some of them, and perhaps a maimed guerrilla was a greater liability to his comrades than a dead one.

During this time we also captured one guerrilla, and apart from shooting him out of hand we had no choice but to take him along with us. He was about fourteen or fifteen and plainly terrified we were going to shoot him.

When he was finally reassured we were not going to kill him he relaxed visibly and volunteered some useful information whilst under interrogation... He must have been aware he was not going to be released and therefore decided to make the best of a bad situation.

Thus it was that a young guerrilla became our faithful and likeable batman for the rest of the patrol. He not only fetched water for us but became adept at malting tea for Sergeant Taylor, who genuinely seemed to like him.

When we were ready to return to the commando base camp above the Mtarazi Falls it seemed natural he should accompany us. So when the helicopter came for the uplift, our leader insisted our new-found friend be given a place in it too... The flight must have been a great adventure for the boy.

Later he was happily integrated into the kitchen staff, and in retrospect one can see the poor lad had no choice. If he returned to his kraal he would quite certainly have been branded as a 'sell-out' and executed by the guerrillas.

It was better to make tea for his erstwhile enemies.

It was during this time that I witnessed other interrogation techniques. An Australian corporal in Sergeant Taylor's stick was particularly fond of forcing uncooperative suspects to lie naked on the ground. He would then with the aid of a fine sjambok – a small whip of cow hide – lightly lash the soles of the victim's feet for a prolonged period. He would only move up to the genital area once he could no longer see what he was whipping through the bloody pulp. The Australian couldn't speak Shona and his victims could rarely speak English so I wondered what was the purpose of the exercise. Surely not for information? At the time I guessed that maybe the corporal wanted to teach the locals a lesson. But with hindsight I suspect it wasn't. Such was the war in Rhodesia.

Special Branch were masters in clandestine warfare and most of the time we had no idea what they were up to. Rural stores were ideal laboratories for Special Branch experimentation, for these stores were prime targets for the guerrillas for whom they represented an easy source of resupplies.

Food, cigarettes and clothes were their main objectives. But they couldn't resist luxury items like wristwatches and transistor radios – which proved especially useful to Special Branch. They bugged radios with

homing devices and planted them in vulnerable stores, and many guerrilla gangs were tracked down and successfully accounted for by fireforce action as a result.

As a variation Special Branch also booby-trapped radios, packing them with explosives and connecting detonators to the switches. We had heard of many guerrillas who were blasted to eternity when they switched on their stolen radios to enjoy the music or get an update on the news.

The SB also used contact and other such poisons, a practice which astonished me. Surely the good guys don't do that, do they? Isn't that what the bad guys should be doing? In spite of that we didn't disapprove. After all, if it was effective it saved us the job of going out to kill them – and maybe getting ourselves killed in the process.

On one occasion Corporal Percy Hodgson's stick, in which I was a rifleman, had been tracking a group of about fifteen guerrillas of the ZANLA faction. It was hard to tell their exact number as they continually bombshelled and regrouped only a day or so later. In spite of that it was obvious their numbers often changed, and I began to appreciate how much they had integrated themselves into the local population.

If we lost their tracks we criss-crossed the terrain to cut the spoor, which in most cases had been deliberately obliterated by cattle tracks. This technique though, often worked against them, for we soon concluded that where there was heavy cattle spoor, there had to be guerrillas around. A 360-degree all-round search would usually result in us cutting their spoor, then the chase would be on again.

Willie Smit, our MAG gunner, was an expert tracker.

This was unusual, as a gunner was severely handicapped as a tracker by the heavy MAG that tended to get in his way. But this never deterred Smit and he found the spoor of over ten of our guerrillas.

Somehow he was able to deduce on this occasion that one of them was wounded, or perhaps sick. Apparently amongst the myriad of indistinguishable footprints he had spotted one with an uncharacteristic scuff mark forward of the toes that indicated a foot being dragged. Watching for this freak pattern, he kept us on track.

After some time the scuff mark began to lengthen, showing the wounded guerrilla had slowed down. The shortness of step was a sure sign to Smit that he was finding it difficult to keep up with his comrades... and after several days on his tracks we finally caught up with him.

Smit had noticed the familiar scuff marks had suddenly disappeared and he knew something was amiss. Our quarry had either made a remarkable recovery – or he had left the main path.

Smit returned to where he had last seen the spoor and began a series of 360°s, enlarging the radius of his search bit by bit. His patience was rewarded when he spotted a fresh green leaf on the ground. On closer inspection he saw that the sap was still moist. Obviously the leaf had been just recently broken off its branch. Smit gave the stick the ‘on spoor’ signal and indicated by silent hand movements that the target was nearby.

We approached a thicket about two hundred metres from the path cautiously, knowing somehow that the enemy was in there. That was always the worst moment – knowing one was stepping into all too possible oblivion.

I shuffled cautiously through the foliage, my heart thumping in my chest. My body was taut with tension, my mouth bone dry and my rifle only a split second away from my shoulder. Suddenly I found myself staring at an apparition.

The guerrilla was lying backed up against a rock with his arms splayed harmlessly by his sides and an SKS rifle lying uncradled over his lap. His head lolled slightly to the left, and seeing his hooded eyes slowly focus on me I stood there mesmerised.

“Don’t touch him!”

My head snapped round, the spell broken.

Percy was at my side, staring at the guerrilla intently, and I gently lowered my rifle.

‘Don’t touch anything,’ he hissed urgently.

The guerrilla’s mouth had fallen open and he was salivating in an obscene fashion.

‘He’s fucked, corp,’ I pronounced stupidly.

Taking no notice of me Percy edged slowly forward and crouched down next to the obviously very sick man who now was emitting soft animal-like groans. Percy took a long time examining the guerrilla. He looked into his eyes, examined his sagging grey skin and finally sniffed at his body. Then, without any explanation, he ordered us to leave. I was very confused. Why had we just gone off and left him like that?

Shortly afterwards I learned we had stumbled on a Special Branch poison victim and, knowing their devious ways, Percy had wisely decided

to leave him for the SB to attend to themselves. And he was proved right. It transpired that a few weeks earlier the victim was a member of a guerrilla gang that had robbed a farm store in search of food and clothing. His mistake – one which proved to be fatal – was to take a pair of blue denim jeans that were hanging innocently above the counter. The SB had doctored the jeans with a dermatotoxic poison that the body absorbs through its hair follicles. After putting on the jeans the poison slowly started to work and his health inexorably to deteriorate.

When we found him he was only a few hours from death.



CHAPTER 8

Bulawayo – August 1976

C

ommando casualties had been mounting steadily.

Only three weeks before a Canadian from 12 Troop, Corporal Matt Lamb, had been killed in action near Nyanyadzi on the Eastern border. The need for extra medics had become evident and I was nominated to attend a Troop Medic's course, to be held at Llewellyn Barracks in Bulawayo.

I did not relish the thought of going all the way to Bulawayo as I didn't know anybody living there, but the idea of a month away from the strict discipline of the commando was appealing.

There were over twenty of us from the battalion and most made the journey to Bulawayo by train. But I was fortunate enough to find a friend, Guy MacKenzie from 2 Commando, who had a car. He wanted to drive down to Bulawayo so that he had a car available for off-duty periods during the course.

Five of us, all well stocked up with cold beers, crammed ourselves into his little Renault 12.

And five hours later the car weaved through the gates of Llewellyn Barracks, its occupants shouting abuse at the National Service Regimental Policemen who moved grudgingly aside.

We somehow located the Medical Training School, and as the car stopped we saw the rest of the course had already fallen in in front of the barrack block.

'Oh shit, we're late ek sê,' swore a 2 Commando man.

Frantically we fell out of the car, hurriedly adjusting our berets, and ran across to join the squad.

A tall, craggy man in his early forties who was wearing a sloppy, navy blue beret at an impossibly unregimental angle, turned slowly towards us. His eyes gleamed behind tinted teardrop spectacles.

‘Ah, kind of you gentlemen to join the course.’

‘Sorry, sarge, we had a puncture.’

‘Sergeant Major, actually, chaps,’ he said softly, tapping his wrist band.

I think he was a territorial because a regular couldn’t possibly have been so untidy. His uniform hung loosely from his tall frame and his boots were brand new and had never seen polish. His Medical Corps stable belt was also brand new and he had not even bothered to adjust it.

But in spite of this he was a first-rate medic, and his wicked and cynical sense of humour livened up what would otherwise have been very dry lectures.

‘Good morning, gentlemen,’ he would say, ‘I trust you had an early night after the homework I’m sure you all did. I just know that none of you could possibly have been involved in that fight in the canteen last night.’ The teardrop glasses would slowly scan the room.

It was rather like being back at school, with copious taking of notes and taxing examinations. But overall the course was rewarding and unexpectedly interesting.

The nights were our own. When we were stood down at 1630hrs. Guy and I would head for the Corporals’ Mess to have a few drinks before changing into civilian clothes. Then we drove into Bulawayo where we succumbed to the lure of the nightclubs and bars.

Because the RLI was a regular battalion, in barracks we troopers could drink in the Corporals’ Mess.

This tended to aggravate the Llewellyn corporals and feelings ran high. Fights often broke out and on one momentous night the mess was badly damaged. The entire course was banned from drinking there for a week and we were confined to barracks. Needless to say the task of evading the Regimental Police was, for experts like us, a simple one.

Our sergeant major berated us.

‘Fucking RLI skates, you’re like bloody children. If you had another brain cell it would be lonely! Now hear this,’ he growled, ‘if there is any more trouble on this course those responsible will be sent back to their units and I will write a very nasty letter indeed to their OC. Is that understood?’

We nodded dumbly.

‘RLI – do you know what that stands for? Do you?... Rhodesia’s Little Idiots, that’s what!’

We laughed and the lecture continued. There were practical sessions as well and our instructor took great delight in making us give each other injections.

During the course a truckload of African troops crashed into a car just outside the gates of the barracks. Some of the lads happened to be in camp at the time and they rushed to the accident scene, eager to practise their newly learned skills. Many of the unfortunate soldiers were seriously injured. Our boys did good work and it seemed that some lives were saved. The sergeant major was well pleased and congratulated the men concerned.

It wasn't long, though, before the course was in trouble again. One day the sergeant major received a visit from the police, our traditional enemies. It appeared that the previous night some RLI troopers had embarked on a spree of vandalism and theft in Bulawayo. Windscreen wipers, wing mirrors and aerials had been ripped from about thirty cars. More seriously, a house had been broken into and a lot of stuff stolen.

The police evidently knew that some men from the course were responsible but had not as yet been able to identify the culprits. The sergeant major was less than cooperative however, and when the police left they were none the wiser.

The case was destined to drag on for months, the various commando OCs loyally ensuring the culprits were 'away in the bush' when required to attend court. But the matter eventually fizzled out when one of the men concerned was killed in action.

The course drew to a close at last and we spent the final week doing practicals out of camp. It was on the way to one of these sessions that I suffered the embarrassment of falling from a moving lorry. I was perched right at the back and too busy arguing with the soldier sitting next to me to notice that the vehicle was about to negotiate a right hand bend. Consequently I was flung on to the tarmac where I landed with a jarring crunch.

The truck drew to a halt a hundred metres further on and my comrades, the budding medics, jumped off and eagerly rushed back to attend to me. Unhappily for them, though fortunately for me, apart from some painful bruises I was an uninteresting patient.

The sergeant major was naturally on hand with a caustic comment.

'Ah, Trooper Cocks, fallen off the back of a truck have we? And we haven't even reached the training area yet. If I had wanted you as a

demonstration model I would have asked you. Anyway, thank you for your impromptu little training session.'

The men of course collapsed into hysterics at my expense.

In his final address the sergeant major handed us our certificates.

'Well done, blokes,' he said, 'you've all done well... But I know you little RLI skates! As soon as you're back in your commandos you'll be stealing the pills and sticking needles into each other's veins.'

He was right.

I returned with Guy to Salisbury where we had a final party before reporting back to our respective commandos.

Four months later, on the 1st February 1977 when the battalion was celebrating its sixteenth birthday, Guy was killed in action.

A large proportion of the troops smoked grass and so did many of the senior NCOs. Even a few of the officers were not averse to smoking a joint occasionally although it was strictly taboo for senior ranks to do so.

Every evening we would take a few crates of beer and sit around the fire or the wood boiler that supplied the camp with hot water. There we drank, smoked grass, played guitars and told stories far into the night.

Most of the guerrillas smoked grass, which we would take from the bodies, so there was never any shortage of the stuff. It was considered a prize to find some good quality grass on a body – almost as good as money, watches or transistor radios. And as many of the local populace also smoked the stuff quite often when we searched their huts we would find some stashed away.

I remember one day lying on my bed in the massive tent at Grand Reef when Simpson's stick returned from a callout. They were all grinning from ear to ear.

'Guess what-aah ouens,' beamed Simpson. 'Father Christmas has arrived.'

With a flourish he extracted a large, scruffy bag of grass from his kidney pouch. He nonchalantly tossed it to the nearest trooper, who couldn't believe his luck.

'Where the fuck did you get this from?'

Simpson and his stick were still grinning broadly at their good fortune. He answered, 'We finished the scene and were waiting for uplift at an LZ near a kraal-aah. While we were waiting, for something to do-aah I tuned

the ouens to search the huts. Dicky and I jorled into this one hut and my eyes nearly popped out-aah. The fuckin' place was full to the ceiling with sacks of dope-aah!

Dicky beamed his agreement as Simpson continued, 'But what a bummer we didn't have our packs with us, cos we didn't have a helluva lotta room to stash the stuff. You should have checked the ouens-aah. They were throwing out everything – drips and rat packs, the lot – trying to cram the stuff in-aah!'

He finished, and we watched as the dope started to appear. It emerged from the jump suits that the men were wearing. It came out of rolled-up sleeping bags, out of ammo pouches and out of medic packs. Everywhere. We all laughed, grinning in anticipation of the happy nights ahead, and slapped Simpson on the back. He had done really well.

It was at this time that Goss Condon (he'd got his name from a well known contraceptive manufacturer) and I decided to experiment with stronger drugs.

One of our priority tasks when a new commando medic – an obvious source of drugs – arrived in the commando was to befriend him. Better still – to share the same tent with him, thus providing us with easy access to the medic's Pandora's Box of medical supplies. In his trunk he had everything we wanted. There was morphine, sosagen, doxypol and a whole host of other painkillers, stimulants and tranquillisers. However we soon tired of the propon (doxypol) as too many tended to cause headaches, especially when combined with alcohol.

Come on Doc' we would wheedle, 'can't you give us some Valium?'

'No chance, someone's been in my trunk and pinched a whole heap. Look.' He lifted up the bottle to show us. 'A week ago it was up to here,' his finger pointed to the top of the bottle, 'and now it's not even half way'

'You should keep the trunk locked,' suggested Goss virtuously.

'I will now' the medic replied. 'But I thought I could trust you skates!'

Goss looked hurt. 'Ah, come on Doc, you know we wouldn't do a thing like that. It was probably those 12 Troop skates. Anyway we always come and ask you first.'

'Like hell you do,' said Doc morosely. 'Anyway you're not getting any – and that's final.'

But we refused to give up.

‘Ah, come on Doc’ I whined, ‘those tabs are the two-milligram ones. We only want a few five-milligram ones and I bet you those haven’t even been touched yet.’

‘Ja, come on Doc’ urged Goss. ‘Let’s have a check at the five-milligram bottle.’

‘No.’

‘Please, Doc. We just want to have a look that’s all.’

‘I said no.’

Goss and I looked forlornly at each other and he said, ‘What sort of a mate is this oke anyway? He won’t even let us have a check. Probably doesn’t even want to check that lekker watch I got from that gook yesterday either’

‘It probably doesn’t even work,’ muttered the Doc as he pretended to sort out the things in his trunk.

I spotted the bottle of five-milligram valium tablets hiding in a corner and pointed. ‘There Doc, there’s the bottle and it’s full. Come on Doc, just a few?’

Goss who was holding the bloodstained watch to his ear nodded. ‘It works Doc, and it’s a Seiko.’

He passed the watch to the medic who eyed it suspiciously. He held it to his ear and we waited with bated breath. This was the most crucial moment of the negotiations.

A few moments later when the Doc said grudgingly, ‘Not bad is it?’ we knew we had won.

I plucked the bottle from the trunk and unscrewed the top.

‘You can have five each, no more.’

‘Ah come on Doc, that won’t even last two days and then we’ll have to come back again for more. Give us twenty and we won’t pester you again,’ Goss said, knowing perfectly well that we would.

You can have fifteen each – and that’s final.’ The medic was starting to get annoyed. ‘And don’t you dare tell the other ouens.’

We counted out the pills under the hawk-eye of Doc and swore ourselves to secrecy, jubilant because we would have been quite happy with less. Then we left the unfortunate man in peace.

Although we preferred pills because they were odourless and could be easily concealed to take any time any place, we also experimented with

morphine. But with it we had to be a lot more careful for we had to inject each other and this definitely could not be done overtly.

Morphine was also very difficult to obtain as anyone issued with morphine had to sign for it, and to lose a phial was a serious offence. So we resorted to using our own phials and would go and ask the Doc for a resupply.

On one occasion, eyeing me suspiciously he asked, 'What have you done with yours?'

'I had to give it to that wounded gook yesterday,' I lied, doing my best to look innocent

'Oh? And since when have you ouens given morphine to wounded gooks?' 'Since yesterday'

The poor medic had no option but to at least pretend he believed us and issue us with new phials. It was seemingly perfectly legal, and from our point of view it was certainly successful. But we couldn't try this ruse too often. So we took to finding out which sticks really had treated wounded gooks and would ask the stick leader to get a resupply of morphine that hadn't really been used.

This worked fairly well, but here again it couldn't be done too often. We finally resorted to theft and occasionally stole phials from the medic packs lying with the webbing in the stand-by area. We didn't like doing this and felt guilty about it, knowing the morphine might well be needed for a wounded comrade. But we salved our consciences with the knowledge that the stick leaders always carried a phial as well.

Once we had a phial we'd sneak off to the latrines and inject each other. Having been on a medic's course I had no difficulty in finding and penetrating a vein easily. But Goss found it hard and invariably my arm would end up looking like a pin cushion.

After Goss' fifth attempt I growled, 'Keep the bevelled edge up you sadistic swine!'

Goss, who had already been injected, giggled. I'm trying. I'm trying.'

Eventually the needle would find the vein and I would wait expectantly for the drug to take effect. Then the two of us wafted back to the boiler in a daze and drank some more beer, wallowing in the happy abandon of living on this new plane until around midnight. Then we would drift back to our beds and listen to Kate Bush and John Paul Young singing on the radio.

At this time Lieutenant Thornton was acting as 2-IC of the commando and Sergeant Abbott was in charge of 14 Troop. Paul Abbott was an enlightened commander, an ex-British Royal Green Jacket who had a very different outlook to many on the war. During fireforce duties at Grand Reef he had instituted a system whereby he would allow two or three men to go off duty each day and take a vehicle into Umtali where they could do as they pleased.

This was an excellent idea as the men could go shopping, watch a movie and generally relax. Naturally we in 11 Troop were really envious of this arrangement, but sadly our manpower level was too low to allow anything similar.

Goss was getting a lot of these passes, the reason being that he had broken his foot.

During a friendly rough and tumble with some of the other troopies Budgie Holmes had thrown a large rock at us. It was meant to intimidate rather than hurt, but it was a bad throw and the rock landed directly on Goss Condon's foot and broke it.

One sunny day Goss and Sarge Abbott climbed aboard a Two-Five, shouting taunts at us as they drove out of the gate on their way to Umtali, 'Enjoy the war, lads. We're gonna get drunk!' and we looked after them enviously as they raced off in a cloud of dust.

One of the machinegunners in 14 Troop was a massive Afrikaner fellow named Prinsloo. He had a hacking cough and had given Goss some money to buy his special brand of cough mixture, and Goss promised to oblige and get him two bottles as requested.

We heard later that the two 14 Troop men soon finished their business in Umtali and decided to spend the rest of the day at the public swimming baths. Armed with a few bottles of wine and a supply of grass they spent an enjoyable day eyeing the pretty girls around the pool. By evening when it was time to come home the wine was finished – so Goss drank one of the bottles of cough mixture to console himself.

They arrived back at camp in a merry state and although Abbott was wise enough to sneak off to his bed to sleep off his disarray, Goss Condon insisted on staggering off to the canteen to buy some beers. But unfortunately the canteen was in full view of the Officers' and Sergeants' Mess, and almost immediately CSM Fraser came storming out.

'CONDON! COME HERE THIS MINUTE!' he screamed.

Goss ignored him and without bothering to turn continued limping towards the canteen.

‘CONDON, HALT WHERE YOU ARE!’ the furious CSM bawled again.

Goss paused and slowly turned. Brazenly waving two fingers in a V sign at the sergeant major he shouted, ‘Why don’t you fuck off and leave me alone?’ and with that disdainfully turned and resumed his slow progress to the canteen.

George Galloway and I were watching from the safety of our tent and George whispered, ‘The crazy bastard, he’s gonna swing for that!’

We waited for the arrest that must inevitably follow, but nothing happened. Possibly the CSM was stunned by Condon’s audacity, for he simply turned and walked back to the mess. Goss was never even charged and to this day I still cannot understand Sergeant Major Fraser’s inaction in the face of such gross insubordination. Perhaps Paul Abbott told the CSM that Goss was consumed with grief over the death of a close relative.

When he got back to the tent Goss was in a really bad way from all the grass and drink he’d had that day. But he was still keen to try some more.

‘Chrish,’ he mumbled to me, I’m in the shit. I drank one of Prinshloo’s bottlesh of cough mixture and he’sh gonna kill me.’

He had good reason to be afraid. Prinsloo was a wild sort who would certainly go into a frenzy if he thought he had been cheated. I don’t think he would have actually have killed Goss but he would have come very close. However it was Goss’ lucky day.

Don’t worry,’ I whispered back. ‘Prinsloo was sent on a tracker course today and he won’t be back for a month.’

Goss grinned, visibly relieved. ‘Oh, well in tha’ caysh lesh drink th’other bottle!’

Don’t you reckon you’ve had enough?’

‘Shert’nly not, I’m rugged! Din’ you hear me tell the She Esh Emm to fuck off?’

When we had swallowed the bottle of cough mixture Goss still wanted more, so we shared a phial of morphine before Goss finally passed out on his bed.

At the time I was thankful, but I was woken in the early hours of the morning by the sound of Goss vomiting violently. He was in a coma, lying on his back and starting to choke as he unwittingly swallowed his vomit.

His body contorted with spasms of pain and I had extreme difficulty in moving him over so that his head was hanging over the side of the bed.

I was forced to hit him violently between the shoulder blades before his wind returned. But he was still unconscious and I had to hold his head for a long while until his vomiting ceased. Finally, and thankfully, I sat and watched him fall asleep at last, snoring heavily.

Goss could quite easily have died and the episode gave us both a fright... But it didn't stop us.

Goss was a very close friend. I guess our experiments with drugs were but a part of the whole trip. A question of getting as close to death as possible – and how better to experience the trip than with someone close to you? It was an insane recklessness with the near-death experiences of the day balancing the dark, sordid sorties to the latrines at night. It was like we had to stay on that higher plane all the time. We couldn't come down.

I believe Goss was a classic victim of war. In spite of having come from a broken home, he excelled at school. With a cutting wit, he was extremely intelligent and had a wonderful sense of humour. Being a fine athlete, he played provincial rugby at senior level whilst still at school. He was also an accomplished actor and had received several awards. In short, he had the world at his feet.

It all started to go awry in the army. He got married to his childhood sweetheart at the age of nineteen. This lasted only a few months, having caught his new bride in bed with another man. The substance abuse worsened and he became reckless in combat. When a woman talked to him he would mm away from her and answer monosyllabically into the wall.

The rollercoaster of alcohol, grass, slimming tablets and morphine came to a head one night in 1978. It was outside a Salisbury night-club during an R and R that Goss had violently attacked a sergeant major from the Military Police. Not content with having knocked the man senseless, Goss proceeded to practise para rolls on to the man's head, jumping from the roof of a car. The unconscious CSM suffered severe head injuries and nearly died. The police issued a summons for Goss' arrest, to charge him with attempted murder, Goss went into hiding in South Africa and was officially posted as a deserter.

He took several jobs waiting tables and as a barman before getting involved in drug running. The law finally caught up with him in Spain and he was incarcerated.



CHAPTER 9

Rambanayi – September 1976

I

n 1976 the Special Air Service, and to an extent the command levels of the Rhodesian Light Infantry, were putting persistent pressure on the General Staff to allow them to operate overtly within the borders of Mocambique.

Both the RLI and the SAS had already been operating on occasions inside Mocambique; the SAS mainly on reconnaissance missions and the RLI in hot pursuit of groups of ZANLA guerrillas who had fled across the border to supposed sanctuary.

Politically and internationally, external raids could have had serious repercussions. That was why the politicians held back.

We of course had all heard the stories of ‘the good old days’ of the early 1970s when the RLI used to operate in support of the Portuguese Army in the Tete Province. The old soldiers used to tell staggering stories of Portuguese inefficiency. Basically this was because though well-equipped and well-fed, the Portuguese troops had no heart for the war they were fighting against FRELIMO. So much was this the case that they were reluctant to leave their forts even when – or perhaps especially when – there was a FRELIMO presence in the area.

So in many instances the RLI and other Rhodesian units had found themselves fighting the battles of the Portuguese for them.

By 1976, due to the increasing success of the RLI, the Selous Scouts and particularly the SAS in cross-border forays, the Rhodesian High Command slowly relented. In fact by the end of the war pre-emptive strikes into neighbouring, hostile states, with the object of destroying the enemy at source in their rear bases, had become a way of Rhodesian service life.

Rambanayi is a small village just over the eastern border in Mocambique. It is on the shore of the great lake created by the Chicamba Real Dam, the

headwaters of which rise in the prosperous tobacco-growing area of the Burma Valley, just south of Umtali in Rhodesia.

It had been established that Rambanayi was the final jump-off point for guerrillas infiltrating Rhodesia through the Burma Valley. It was also known that they were housed in makeshift barracks and guarded by detachments of FRELIMO soldiers. But intelligence was shaky and it was not known how many guerrillas were likely to be found there at any one time.

The commando moved to an old farmhouse on the fringe of the Burma Valley. Lieutenant Smith, recently recovered from a serious chest wound, briefed us that we were going on a raid into Mocambique and for the next two weeks we would be rehearsing for the attack. It would take place at night so we would have to rehearse at night, he said, and we groaned. In base camp the nights were usually our own.

Schultz, as usual, had managed to find us a secluded billet. It was a large, airy bunker that had been built by 2 Commando during a tour there.

About bloody time,' he said, grinning. Usually we're the suckers who have to build the things.'

The bunker was waterproof. Even better, it was situated well out of the reach of Sergeant Major Fraser.

The rehearsals began in earnest. It was hard work, mainly because for some reason Lieutenant Adams of 12 Troop believed we all had to be fitter than our normal ultra-fit if we were to cross over into Mocambique. We commenced a series of runs, very fast and over long distances, and I found it difficult to keep up. But somehow I managed.

We also spent many hours poring over a small-scale sand model of the target that the officers had constructed. Each troop had its own role, and we were shown which hut was whose target and which bunkers had to be destroyed.

I envied 13 Troop who were to be vehicle-borne. Unlike the rest of us they would ride in mounted on Umimogs, MAGs blazing away – the kind of mechanised cavalry more usually seen on the cinema screen. They certainly looked very rugged in their helmets and goggles, hunched over their machineguns.

II Troop was designated as the anti-tank element. We knew FRELIMO had Soviet-supplied T-34 tanks and although we had no idea if any were based at Rambanayi, we could not take any chances. The troop was

equipped with five 3.5 rocket launchers. Each weapon had an operator and a number two to load. I was detailed to be Schoultz's number two. Everyone had to be capable of firing the 3.5, and as I had never fired one I took great delight in learning how to do it.

To subdue the violent blast and the reaction of the launcher as the projectile left the barrel was something of a challenge. If not held properly the operator and his assistant could easily and viciously be thrown backwards by the force of the detonation. It needed a lot of practice.

For the umpteenth time I rammed a rocket into the back of the tube and connected the wires to the terminals. (Very antiquated system, I thought).

‘Ready,’ I shouted.

Schoultz huddled over the launcher and squinted down the sights.

I slapped him firmly on the back of his helmet as final confirmation, then shrank to the earth with my hands tightly covering my ears.

Schoultz squeezed the trigger and the ground around us seemed to erupt with shuddering vibrations as the projectile whooshed towards the forty-four gallon drum that had been put up as a target and exploded with a roar only two metres to the right of it.

‘Not bad, Schoultz,’ said Lieutenant Smith. ‘Not bad, you’re getting closer. Try again.’

We practised the assault until we had it to perfection.

When the night came we were deployed under cover of darkness by vehicles to a deserted farm on the border. It was to be our start point for the operation.

I had never seen so many soldiers before. Apart from 3 Commando, the whole of 2 Commando and the Special Air Service were there. It was chaos in the pitch-black darkness. No lights were permitted and talking was kept to a minimum.

This puzzled me, for even if we had all shouted at the tops of our voices we still wouldn’t have been heard above the roar of all the vehicles.

We were to walk into Mocambique, a distance of about twelve kilometres which didn’t seem so bad. However when the walk began so did the nightmare. It was a shambles. The entire column of four hundred and fifty soldiers moved slowly in single file, and for some reason there were innumerable halts. We never had any explanation why however, because by

the time a signal had been passed all the way down the line that the column was halting temporarily, the front had already started moving again.

For some reason, no doubt good to my superior officers I was nominated as lead man for 3 Commando positioned immediately behind the last man of 2 Commando. He was an exceedingly unpleasant person who hissed at me continually to maintain proper distance.

‘Hey you.’ he would snap in a loud whisper, ‘don’t bunch up for fuck’s sake. We’ve just crossed into Mocambique – switch on!’

‘So what?’

I continually adjusted my distance, but it never seemed to satisfy him and eventually he began to really irritate me. In fact he only stopped whining when, five kilometres inside Mocambique, the operation was called off. We were never told why.

We mumbled and cursed as we turned about.

All that fucking training ... for what?

The return march was even more frustrating. The men were already exhausted and their weariness now was compounded by the lack of action they had been anticipating.

The 2 Commando man ahead of me now became even more niggly and I found myself hard-pressed just to maintain a frosty silence ... Needless to say I was perversely pleased when exhaustion caused him to take a wrong path and get the whole of 3 Commando lost in the process. Lieutenants Smith and Adams cursed him wildly ... and he certainly got no sympathy from me.

We finally got back to our farmhouse base just as dawn began to pale the eastern sky. The cooks were diere, conscientious as ever, serving coffee and soup from makeshift kitchens. We gulped the food down gratefully, then fell asleep amidst the folds of the truck tarpaulins.

The raid eventually materialised a few days later. It was a carbon copy of the previous rehearsals. But this time it was more successful.

Schoultz and I were in a position somewhat detached from the main action, and although we didn’t get a chance to fire our 3.5 we had an excellent view of nearly everything that went on.

2 Commando had swept south through the living quarters of the camp and had claimed a few kills. But there were not many ZANLA guerrillas there. Unfortunately it transpired we had hit the base when the flow of

incoming guerrilla reinforcements was at a low ebb. (Presumably they were now all in Rhodesia). After all the preparation it was disappointing.

II Troop had the task of securing a major bridge crossing a large tributary feeding Chicamba Dam. At the eastern edge of the bridge a large FRELIMO detachment with a 12.7 heavy machinegun was ensconced in a blockhouse of formidable construction.

Being part of the rocket-launching teams, Schoultz and I did not take part in the actual assault. We had been designated as back-up in case things got rough.

Sheltered in a drainage ditch we watched the attack go in, and sat with our hearts in our mouths when we saw the shadowy figures of Lieutenant Smith and Trooper-Peebles creeping over the bridge.

Suddenly the sky was bathed with light as a FRELIMO flare burst high above them. Smith and Peebles dived beneath the railings of the bridge. But they still looked exposed and I felt positive the FRELIMO crew of the 12.7 heavy machine-gun in the bunker would spot them and open fire.

Echoing my thoughts Schoultz said, 'Shit man, those ouens are going to get nailed.'

It was then that Smit and Garnett began to stalk forward. At least, we thought, that gave the lads the added power of Smit's MAG.

Another flare looped into the sky and burst high above, and the attackers dropped to the ground. But this time they were clearly illuminated. The Freds had spotted them and immediately pyrotechnic ribbons of red and green tracer arched over the prostrate soldiers.

Then the flare flickered out

Taking advantage of the sudden darkness that blinded the defenders and crouching beneath the tracers the four men darted towards the bunker and began a steady return fire. I found I was almost jumping up and down in my agitation.

'Come on, Trev,' I urged, let's go and help those okes.'

'Oh yeah?' Schoultz replied, 'and how we gonna help them with a 3.5 at this range?'

Percy Hodgson's stick ran across the bridge at that moment, firing as they went and reminding me of a hit team in a Mafia movie. The firing from the bunker intensified as the Rhodesian reinforcements approached, but miraculously none of the men were hit.

I watched, my heart beating furiously, as Smit threw his MAG aside and began dragging himself slowly towards the blockhouse. He held a grenade in each hand. He hunched himself against the sandbags of the bunker beneath the protruding barrel of the 12.7 and pulled the grenade pins. Then, raising himself, he calmly rolled the grenades one at a time over the parapet. There were two muffled ‘crumps’ from within and the screams of the victims rippled across the bridge and up to where Schoultz and I were sheltering.

At the same time Percy and his stick reached the bunker and began pumping rounds into its depths. Soon afterwards they ceased firing. 11 Troop had achieved its objective. And from then on the guerrillas pulled their base camps back farther into the hinterland of Mocambique.

Corporal Bob Smith, an Englishman who was the most outstandingly individualistic character in the commando, had served for many years in the British Parachute Regiment. I’m sure there are many British Paras who remember him to this day. Smith, who was in his late twenties, had handsome aquiline features which he managed to hide with his tousled, tawny hair and an enormous ginger moustache ... And he had a most unusual body.

His shoulders were excessively broad, which had earned him the nickname of ‘Shoulders’ in the British Army, but from there on down his physical attributes became increasingly unique. I for one have never seen the like before or since of his incredibly skinny legs and knock knees. He was also a chain smoker and all his fingers were stained deep orange well beyond his knuckles. What made me curious was how all the digits were stained with the same degree of uniformity. I asked him once how he managed to achieve this.

‘Do you change fingers every time you have a smoke corp?’

‘No son, it’s where I put them – and don’t tell me you fucking Rhodesians aren’t closet nanny fuckers either’

At drill Smith was absolutely hopeless and we would often almost cry with laughter when he tried to march. His legs seemed utterly out of control for they both flew in all directions and were never in step.

In the early days of the war a corporal could not be promoted to the rank of sergeant without having first passed a Drill and Weapons course at

the School of Infantry in Gwelo. It was an intensive twelve-week course, six weeks for weapons and six weeks for drill.

However, as the war intensified the commandos found they could ill-afford to send experienced corporals away for such lengths of time ... Later on I was offered the rank of sergeant without having to go on a drill and weapons course. But as I was soon due for discharge, I refused.

However, Bob Smith did attend the course, and in his own inimitable style he wrote his name in the Rhodesian record books. Bob was an excellent weapons instructor and he had a comprehensive knowledge of and experience with a large number of the many modern weapons of war. It was not surprising therefore that he passed the weapons part of the course with the highest marks ever attained, and 11 Troop was proud of him.

Unfortunately however, the drill part proved to be a total disaster. Bob hated drill as he knew he couldn't march. And besides that he considered drill irrelevant to guerrilla warfare. He managed to last the drill course for just over a week when he decided he'd had enough.

He had been given time to prepare to instruct his fellow corporals on how to 'form squad', a very exacting drill movement... But Bob made no preparations whatsoever for his lesson. One sunny morning while the rest of the squad held its collective breath, he marched on to the square and stumbled to a messy halt in front of the squad.

'I have been ordered to instruct you on how to "form squad" ', he said, addressing the troops. 'But since this movement was last used with any success at the Battle of Waterloo I consider it archaic and useless. Therefore, teaching it to you will be a complete waste of time.'

With that he executed an imperfect about-turn, saluted the astonished major, and marched off the square. Not unexpectedly he was thrown off the course and returned to 3 Commando, and for him this was a mixed blessing.

Although most of the officers respected Bob for his weapons prowess and soldiering ability in the bush, the majority of them disliked him for three reasons.

Firstly he had no respect for rank, and treated a man only according to his worth as a soldier.

Secondly, he had no strong beliefs in personal hygiene.

Lieutenant Smith, who bore the same name and had a love-hate relationship with Bob, was always criticising him for this.

‘Corporal Smith, don’t you think it’s about time you had a shower? You really are fucking gungy.’

‘Sir, I deliberately don’t bathe to ensure my body assumes a natural smell in the bush. If I went out ponging of soap, the gooks would pick me up a mile off.’

It wasn’t only the officers who found his smell offensive. I once shared a tent with Bob at Grand Reef and found his body odours downright awful. Even when he grudgingly took the occasional shower he would still insist on putting his foul-smelling boots back on, which negated the whole process.

Perhaps even more offensive than his boots was Bob’s frightful hat. It was a woollen balaclava knitted by the WVS which was rolled up so that it sat snugly on his mass of ginger hair. It gave him the appearance of a rakish, evil-smelling Cockleshell Hero.

Originally olive-green in colour, with time, decay and neglect the hat had become a sort of filthy grey and was obscenely festooned with an array of decorations that included porcupine quills, some tattered guinea-fowl feathers, and even at one time what looked very much like a cat’s tail dangling down behind.

The hat was used not only as headgear. Deeming it to be more versatile than just a hat, Bob always cleaned his dixies with it after he had cooked his food while on patrol... and as Bob only ate curry in the bush this made his habit even more disgusting.

Naturally tire curry-stained hat became progressively more odious and inefficient as time progressed, and his mess tin, in spite of his occasional half-hearted efforts at cleaning the tiling, accumulated numerous crusty layers of ageing curry and rice.

‘It all adds to the flavour of the next meal,’ Bob explained.

Usually it was months before his dixies were washed properly – and then only after their disgusting residue had accumulated to such an extent there was little room left for the fresher food.

The third and certainly the major reason for Bob’s lack of popularity with the officers was that he consorted with black women. There were a few Rhodesians who were not averse to having relationships with black girls, but having been brought up in a racial environment, most of us abstained. Although many of his comrades found Bob’s antics distasteful they

generally left him alone ... If having sex with blacks was his personal preference, that was his business.

Some of the officers looked at it differently though and were continually looking for reasons to have him chucked out, not only from the commando but, if possible, from the battalion. I'm sure many of them secretly longed for the implementation of an Immorality Act so that they could get him thrown in gaol.

However as it was not against Rhodesian law to cohabit with persons of other racial groups they were faced with a considerable dilemma. Bob was by no means the only foreigner (or local) who went out with black girls. He was just less discreet. What really aggravated the situation was that Bob made no secret of his preferences and would talk quite openly about his black girlfriends – who were whores in the main. This infuriated his enemies, but Bob only laughed and threatened to bring his black lovers along to the next commando party ... He never did though, probably because he realised he would have been tempting fate just a little bit too far.

Anyway, Bob stuck to his principles and I heard some time later that he married a black girl after the war. He'd only been married a few short months when he died of cancer.



CHAPTER 10

Battle of Hill 31 – November 1976

I

had just celebrated my nineteenth birthday when the commando was once again moved to the Honde Valley.

I was with the first wave of the fireforce troops, based at the top of the escarpment. The second wave was in the valley at Ruda, an Internal Affairs (IntAf) Department keep and base camp.

Just prior to our arrival at Ruda it had been heavily mortared by FRELIMO, firing from across the border in Mocambique.

A few of the black IntAf District Assistants based there had recently mutinied. The revolt had been quickly and ruthlessly suppressed, but the Keep Commander asked if we could lend him someone to instil some discipline into the erstwhile rebels and Corporal Smith gladly volunteered. He relished the cruelty.

The siren sounded just before 0600hrs. on a sunny Monday morning, while most of us were still shaving or preparing for breakfast.

We grabbed our kit and in a mad scramble piled on board the Unimogs, which hustled us off to the chopper pad a few hundred metres away.

Lieutenant Smith was perched precariously on the vehicle's roll bar.

'Stop One – everyone here?' he demanded.

'Van der Merwe here,' shouted Humphrey, the MAG gunner,

'Cocks here,' I called.

'MacDonald present,' drawled a bespectacled Canadian. MacDonald had only joined the commando a few days earlier and apart from his rather rotund figure had shown a lot of promise.

The vehicles bounced to a halt at the chopper pad and we tumbled out and formed up in emplaning positions about twenty metres from our respective choppers. Even though it was early in the morning and still quite

cold, the black camouflage cream on my face had started to run and mingle with my sweat.

It was the sweat of anticipation and fear.

I was very aware of it as I checked my webbing for the umpteenth time... Pouches were buttoned up – tight enough to stop the magazines from falling out, loose enough to make extraction fast and simple when the time came.

The pilot of our helicopter gave the thumbs-up signal and crouching low under the screaming blades we boarded the machine. Seconds later we were airborne and the Alouette seemed to strain under the weight as it banked and headed east over the escarpment.

It was always a great thrill to fly in a helicopter formation. It gave one a sense of controlled power, like men in the old-time cavalry charges must have felt.

Within minutes we had crossed the valley floor and Lieutenant Smith silently indicated a large, ominous-looking mountain on the eastern fringe of the valley. This forbidding lump was somehow reminiscent of Vietnam and it would later be christened 'Hill 31' by the Americans in the commando.

Being the stick leader, Lieutenant Smith wore the spare set of headphones. He was listening in to Captain Donald who was directing operations from the K-car, and a few moments later gave us the thumbs-down signal to indicate we were going in. I tensed instinctively.

The landing time was when a helicopter was at its most vulnerable, for the pilot was fully occupied manoeuvring his machine into what more often than not were cramped LZs. At this time the technician could not defend the aircraft either. This was because he had to temporarily abandon his twin Brownings and lean out as far as he could from the chopper to look for hidden obstacles like stumps or rocks.

The pilot suddenly banked to the right and fanned the helicopter over a clearing, and moments later the wheels made contact with the ground. We immediately leaped out and dashed for the nearest cover and within seconds the chopper was back in the air again, on its way to collect the second wave of troops from Ruda.

Lying prone behind a protecting bush I took stock of the position.

We were at the foot of the mountain. The only sound was that of the K-car throbbing high above us. The area seemed to be deserted.

‘Probably another fucking lemon’, I said to Humphrey who nodded optimistically.

After speaking on his radio Lieutenant Smith signalled us to move out.

We skirted south along the base of the mountain for about ten minutes until we came across another stick. It was a tracker unit from the 4th Battalion of the Rhodesian Regiment.

As regulars we had little respect for territorials. But their tracker units were always of the highest calibre and these bearded men were no exception. They had initiated the contact in fact, and had already claimed three kills.

Sergeant Laurie Ryan, their stick leader, was tragically killed in a hunting accident a few years later. That morning I heard him as he spoke to Lieutenant Smith behind the cover of a large boulder.

‘We spotted them at dawn this morning. There must have been over forty heading up the gomo in single file. My guess is they’ve just come in from Mocambique and intended to possey up for the day up top there.’ He pointed at the mountain.

Then Lieutenant Smith’s radio crackled into life.

‘Stop One ... Stop One ... this is Three Nine.’

It was more instructions from the K-car.

The first wave sticks would act as stop groups, guarding the various re-entrants and gullies that ran down the mountain. The second wave would execute a sweep up the mountain from the north-west, while a company of the Rhodesian African Rifles swept up from the east.

An arduous trek took us halfway up the steep slopes and brought us to the re-entrant we were to defend. It was deep and covered with thick vegetation.

Humphrey took up a defensive position, his machinegun covering the ravine.

We waited.

The fight on top of the hill began to warm up.

We heard the dull thudding of the K-car’s 20mm cannon as the Lynx swooped down several times and delivered its deadly load of flaming napalm.

The seemingly unceasing rattle of small-arms fire drifted down to our position, and after two hours of sitting and waiting in enforced inactivity Lieutenant Smith began to get agitated.

‘I reckon we’re wasting our bloody time here – and they won’t let me move!’

He wanted to get involved and was sure we were missing all the action ... He was mistaken, though. A few minutes later MacDonald crawled over to me and whispered, ‘Chris, I’ve just seen two gooks creeping down the gully. They’re coming towards us.’

‘Well, why didn’t you shoot diem?’ I was amazed.

‘I wasn’t sure what to do,’ he said in embarrassment.

I crept over to Lieutenant Smith and told him, and he too said, ‘Why didn’t MacDonald shoot them for God’s sake?’

We manoeuvred ourselves quietly to the edge of the gully and waited.

It wasn’t long before I heard the crunching of someone walking on dry leaves.

Two men came into view, half crouched, their AKs at the ready.

The weapons looked new and they were well dressed in Communist East German combat jackets and blue denim jeans. One of them wore a checked, woollen cap with earflaps on the side. It looked incongruous, for a moment reminding me of a character out of ‘Peanuts’.

They were about forty metres away, still stalking furtively towards our position, and Lieutenant Smith breathed to Humphrey, ‘Wait for my command.’

Humphrey nodded mutely, his lips white and bloodless.

When they were twenty metres away Lieutenant Smith dropped his hand and Humphrey opened fire.

For a brief, fractured second the guerrillas stared towards us in stark disbelief. Then the bullets found their mark. The leading man dropped like a rag doll and his companion, obviously wounded, crashed like a wounded buffalo into the heavy undergrowth in a frantic bid to escape the murderous hail of bullets. The firing ceased and there was silence, with only the dust and smoke wafting around the lifeless guerrilla.

Lieutenant Smith grimaced and said, ‘We’re going to have to flush the other one out. Chris, come with me. Van, you and MacDonald cover us,’

Humphrey nodded mutely. I think he was stunned at what he had just done.

The lieutenant and I advanced cautiously into the undergrowth, rifles tense – at the ready. For indeed, a wounded and cornered guerrilla was far more dangerous than a wounded buffalo. We peered cautiously around, our

ears and eyes straining. Then a faint whimpering came from a ditch about twenty paces away.

‘Come out and give yourself up,’ Lieutenant Smith shouted.

There was no reply. But the whimpering stopped.

Lieutenant Smith repeated the surrender call a few more times, but still there was no response.

I’m going to chuck a grenade in. That’ll sort him out. Cover me.’ Smith took a grenade from his pouch and leopard-crawled to within five metres of the ditch.

He lay on his side and pulled the pin, then rolled the grenade down the slope. Moments later there was a sharp detonation, followed by an almost imperceptible grunt... The guerrilla was dead.

Smith stood up and cautiously approached the dead man, and took an AK, ammunition and two stick grenades from the body. Then he looked around thoughtfully, and I realised that now our leader had tasted blood he wanted more.

He radioed his contact report to Captain Donald up in the K-car, who ordered us to move to the top of the mountain.

The scene reminded me of ‘The Grand Old Duke of York’, and as we laboured up the steep slopes burdened with the weapons of the dead guerrillas I hummed the tune softly to myself, talking to myself at the same time.

*The Grand Old Duke of York,
(Watch that bush ... clear!)
He had ten thousand men,
(What will we find at the top?)
He marched them up to the top of the hill,
(Christ, why doesn’t that bugger Smith slow down?)
And he marched them down again.*

We arrived breathless at the summit, having had a struggle to keep up with our now buoyant lieutenant. Huddled amongst some rocks was a stick of territorials. They looked frightened and were obviously greatly relieved to see us. Their webbing and the quantity of ammunition they were carrying were hopelessly inadequate for the job in hand, and they were

understandably pleased when they were ordered to descend the mountain. I felt sorry for them – they weren't soldiers – they were civilians forced into uniform.

About thirty metres away in a clearing were the bodies of four guerrillas who had been killed earlier, either by the K-car or by the second wave troops.

Once again we took up defensive positions among the rocks and waited.

I was next to Humphrey, covering the clearing. The K-car could be heard firing its cannon and I knew black troops of the Rhodesian African Rifles were in action on the eastern slopes.

Suddenly a guerrilla walked into the clearing.

I nudged Humphrey.

'Look Van, it's a bloody gook.'

The man was moving unhurriedly across our front. He was making no attempt to seek cover. It was almost as if he had given up hope and knew death would be with him soon. He was tall and he was carrying two AKs at the trail, one in each hand.

I raised my rifle and took aim.

'Don't shoot, he's RAR,' Humphrey whispered urgently.

Because the man had made no attempt to take cover Humphrey concluded he must be an RAR soldier.

'Bollocks, he's not,' I said. "What's an RAR doing with two AKs?"

'He probably took them from those bodies.'

I momentarily lowered my rifle, but although Humphrey had implanted seeds of doubt I was still convinced the man was a guerrilla. Why wasn't he wearing Rhodesian camouflage?

He was by now almost across the clearing and I said, 'He's a fucking gook and I'm going to shoot him.' I lifted my rifle again, steadied it and took deliberate aim at the man's chest – we had always been taught to aim at the chest for it presented the largest target on a man's body.

I squeezed the trigger and my shot rang out. The man dropped immediately, dead before he hit the ground.

'You've just killed a fucking RAR!' muttered Humphrey, aghast.

The seeds of doubt sprouted and suddenly I was very worried as we went forward together to inspect the body. It was with considerable relief

that we both concluded the man had indeed been a guerrilla, not an RAR soldier.

I had hit him right between the eyes. So much for my careful chest shot.

While in the clearing we inspected the other four bodies and stripped them of their weapons.

As I went to the last one, which was lying face down under a bush, I saw the head move slightly.

Instinctively I stepped a few paces back, rifle in my shoulder and called out, 'Sir, this one is still alive.'

'Well, finish the fucker off,' retorted Lieutenant Smith.

I raised my rifle and fired, but I snatched at the trigger. It was a bad shot which merely creased the man's skull just above his ear.

'What a shit shot,' said Lieutenant Smith, unimpressed.

The wounded guerrilla lifted his chest off the ground and raised his arms in a gesture of surrender.

'Don't shoot me, sir,' he implored, his eyes filled with terror.

'Shall I have another go, sir?' I asked uncertainly.

'No,' said Lieutenant Smith much to my relief, 'not in cold blood. Anyway, I guess we could do with a capture.'

I went up to the young man and dragged him from under the bush. He had been shot in both legs and was in a lot of pain. I was curious. He didn't look like my idea of a terrorist. He was just like any other ordinary African – very like one who had been my friend at school.

MacDonald dressed his shattered legs and bandaged the wound on his head where I had dismally failed in my attempt to kill him.

We were now confronted by the problem of what to do with our captive. The clearing on the summit was too small and too rocky for a helicopter to land and the only alternative was for us to carry him to the bottom of the mountain, which none of us fancied.

Lieutenant Smith was in a quandary and I tried a different approach.

'Sir, how about getting a chopper to drop us a hot-extraction harness? We could tie him up in that and the chopper could take him away'

Lieutenant Smith thought this a good idea and radioed the K-car with the suggestion. But it proved in vain. We were told it was impractical. (I don't know why). A chopper would drop a stretcher instead. We would have to carry Cuthbert – he had told us his name – to the nearest LZ. As this

was at the foot of the mountain we cursed him vigorously – and the others cursed me.

‘I wish you hadn’t missed the bastard,’ moaned Humphrey bitterly.

The stretcher finally arrived and we started the long trek down the mountain. It was back-breaking work getting down the treacherous path and Cuthbert apologised continuously for causing us so much trouble.

Thankfully halfway down we met up with two other sticks and they assisted us with the stretcher and the captured weapons. Even so it took four men to carry the wounded man, and by the time we reached the foot of the mountain most of us were exhausted.

We were therefore at our lowest ebb when we had another completely unexpected contact with the enemy. Two guerrillas had bravely decided to ambush us on the path.

At the first shot we tumbled behind cover, in our haste dropping the stretcher and Cuthbert along with it. We were too exhausted even to return fire and merely watched dully as, with unabated energy, Lieutenant Smith expertly executed a one-man flanking attack ... He engaged the enemy single-handedly and killed both of them.

After a long two hours we finally arrived at a suitable LZ and the wounded guerrilla was uplifted by helicopter. Later as dusk approached we were also picked up and taken back to the relative warmth of our base camp, where we fell into lifeless slumbers with Humphrey van der Merwe still wearing the ‘Peanuts’ cap he had snatched as a souvenir from the first dead guerrilla.

I felt sorry for the second wave, for they had to spend an uncomfortable night on the mountain.

The next day we returned to the mountain to retrieve the bodies. I couldn’t understand why we just didn’t leave them there. It was a difficult and grisly task as some had been dead for more than thirty-six hours. But by 1500hrs. the job was finished and thirty-one bodies were laid out in a row in a school courtyard near the foot of the mountain. It was a grotesque sight.

There were crushed skulls, mangled limbs, and corpses with their guts spilling out onto the hot dry dust. One had its penis obscenely bloated and erect.

The local people watched in sullen silence, unable to keep their eyes from the gruesome scene confronting them as a covey of journalists, who

had just arrived on the scene, snapped away with their cameras amidst a thick swarm of hungry flies.

We had suffered one casualty, Trooper da Costa, who was killed in the opening hours of contact. Da Costa had been in the commando for just over a month, assigned to 11 Troop. We had liked his gentle and unassuming manner. He used to show me faded snapshots of his wife and children in his rural, poverty-stricken village home back in Portugal.

On Thursday 18th November 1976 the banner headline in the Rhodesia Herald newspaper read:

‘FORCES BAG 31 IN ONE BATTLE.’

Written by the Herald's Defence Reporter, Chris Reynolds from the Honde Valley in Eastern Rhodesia, I have taken the liberty of including the report verbatim.

Rhodesian security forces killed 31 terrorists in a 12-hour battle on the slopes of a rugged kopje covered in dense bush in this fertile valley on Monday.

It was the most spectacular kill by security forces in the war to date. The Army Officer Commanding the area, Lieut-Colonel Peter Browne, described the action yesterday:

“It was a good war and we enjoyed it. Fortunately the enemy lost.”

The Commander 3 Brigade, Brigadier Deny MacIntyre, flew to a forward air-base here yesterday to congratulate the soldiers of the Rhodesian Light Infantry and the Rhodesian African Rifles who took part in the operation.

He was obviously delighted and rubbed his hands with glee.

“Bloody fine effort, chaps,” he said.

And turning to me with a wide grin, he added: “We shall go on slotting them as fast as they come in.”

Colonel Browne added: "This is only the start. Join us in a couple of days. Get yours before the Christmas rush."

Rhodesian security forces lost one man in the operation – Trooper Francisco Dearte da Costa. He was 31, married, and came from Portugal.

Captain Kip Donald said everyone involved in the operation was very sad about the death of Trooper da Costa.

But he added: "You can't go down in the doldrums because one man was killed."

Insurgents

The operation against the terrorists started at 5.45 a.m. and ended about 8 p.m. with the death of the final two insurgents. It took place about 10 km from the Mozambique border.

Colonel Browne said the terrorists had infiltrated from Mozambique.

"They were very ill-trained," he said. "They had been pushed in here from Mozambique with the obvious intention of trying to prolong the war.

"They had been marching for two days and had not eaten for two days."

Captain Donald said security forces received information of the terrorist presence at about 4.45 a.m. on Monday. The first contact was about one hour later on the western face of the kopje, with Air Force back-up.

Follow-up operations finished on Tuesday.

Captain Donald said the operation was particularly difficult for the security forces because of the dense vegetation.

"The terrorists lie low until you virtually bump into them," he said. "You come across them face to face. You have to clear just about every bush. They just lie there. They will not fire at you unless you actually step on them. It is nothing to have a contact at a range of less than one metre."

Captain Donald said that in the follow-up operations security forces found one of the terrorists in a kneeling position. His AK rifle was pointed at his chest and one round had been discharged.

The security forces mainly responsible for the record kill are from 3 Commando RLI. They have the emblem "Lovers 3 Commando" on their sweat shirts.

Success

“A success like this is bound to be a great morale-booster to the troops.” said Captain Donald.

Sergeant Laurie Ryan, bearded, brown as a berry from life in the bush and 36 years old, was one of the first to contact the terrorists.

“I came across two lying in the grass.” he said. “They were about two metres away. We shot them.

“Then we came across another two. One of them threw a grenade that went off about two metres from us.

“Further on up the ridge we came across a terrorist lying in a ditch. We threw him a grenade and that sorted him out.

“One of the chaps in our stick got wounded, but he continued fighting for three hours. In all we were in five contacts, with bullets flying everywhere. But we killed six terrorists.

“It was a well commanded operation by Captain Donald. At times it was exhilarating. I am looking forward to another one if we can have this sort of success.”

Wounded in the operation was Corporal Graham Hutley. He has a shrapnel wound in his face.

In one of the contacts he was fired on by a terrorist lying in a ditch just over two metres away. In another he sighted a terrorist in a river.

“He ran like hell,” he said.

Firing

“There was very heavy firing as we stopped the terrorists coming down from the kopje. I found one lying in the bush. I killed him. As I fired I hit his two grenades. They both went off and I got shrapnel in my face.

“In another contact a terrorist fired at me from short range from a ditch. I shot him. As I moved in to see if he was dead another terrorist in the ditch opened up. He was also shot.”

Corporal Hutley has been 13 months in the Army. He killed three terrorists in the operation.

Corporal Bob Smith was in a stick that killed two of the terrorists. They shot one more who crawled into the bush and bled to death.

“It was the hardest contact I have been in,” he said. “But man, we cleaned them out.”

A member of 1 RAR, a Karanga tribesman, said he had no qualms about killing black terrorists,

“I am a soldier,” he said. “The politicians can come with their politics, I am fighting to win this war.”

This was his sixth contact.

Security forces recovered vast amounts of war materials, including 82mm mortar's, RPG 2 and 7 rockets, cases of 762 intermediate ammunition, landmines, an RPD machinegun, Chinese stick grenades, AK and SKS rifles, sophisticated medical supplies and Portuguese Army kitbags.

The 31 terrorists killed in the operation were part of the 33 killed, announced by Security Forces Headquarters yesterday. This brings the total this month to 173 - 10 percent of the total terrorist force reported to be operating inside Rhodesia.

Yesterday's communique confirmed that security forces have killed the terrorist leader and seven members of the gang responsible for the murder of Mr. Theofilios Greyvenstein (61) at his Ashton farm in the Mayo district on September 16.

The leader of the gang lay dead on a concrete slab beneath plastic sheeting at Rusape police station yesterday.

Special Branch Superintendent Brian Thomas said the man who led the killers is as yet unidentified. His men called him Commando or Leader. He called them Comrade.

Mr. Greyvenstein, a grandfather and father of three daughters, was murdered near the security fencing of his farm after terrorists had destroyed the building with rocket and mortar fire.

“It was a particularly brutal murder,” said Superintendent Thomas. “This was a completely defenceless man alone in his house. He obviously put up a fight before he died.”

The terrorist leader, armed with communist weapons, fired the first shot that killed the elderly farmer.

Police have calculated his age at about 27 and the average age of his gang at 25.

The gang has been operating in the Mayo area for over a month and is believed to be the same group responsible for another attack on a European homestead.

“Their obvious aim was to programme the locals and force the European farmers from the land,” said Superintendent Thomas, “It is to the everlasting credit of the farmers that they are still there,”

The same gang, who wore denims, had ambushed a security force vehicle a few days ago and was responsible for the death of a member of the security forces.

The full text of yesterday's communiqué read:

"Security Force Headquarters regrets to announce the deaths in action of Field Reservist Gary Vivian Hunt, and Trooper Francisco Dearte da Costa.

"Field Reservist Hunt, aged 23 and single, came from the Nyamandhlovu area. Trooper da Costa, aged 31 and married, came from Portugal. All next of kin have been advised.

"Since the communiqué issued yesterday, 33 more terrorists have been lotted by security forces.

"It can now be confirmed that security forces have lotted the terrorist leader and seven members of the gang responsible for the murder of Mr. T. Greyvenstein on his farm on September 16.

"In further acts of brutality, terrorists have been responsible for the murder of seven African males in the operational areas."

So ended the article. It was a record kill for a single contact. There were photographs of Captain Donald, Bob Smith, Graham Hutley and Sergeant Laurie Ryan. We felt full of bravado. We were heroes.

No mention was ever made of Cuthbert, our capture, but I believe after recovering fully he was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. He was obviously released at Independence in 1980.

I sometimes wonder what he is doing today and would like to meet with him.

It was after the battle on Hill 31 that I really came to like, or rather, respect Simpson.

Simpson, Condon, myself and one or two others were ordered back to barracks in Salisbury to attend a Leadership Cadre. Being the senior trooper, Simpson was put in command of the Land-Rover taking us to town. We left the Honde Valley after breakfast and by 1100hrs. were sitting happily in the public bar of the Cecil Hotel in Umtali.

Unfortunately we had thoughtlessly left our personal weapons lying unguarded in the back of the Land-Rover which was parked in the main street outside the hotel.

We had intended to hand them in at the reception as was the custom. But we were commandos – and we had just been in the biggest contact of the war! No bastard would dare lay a finger on us, we thought, and by 1500hrs. we were drunk.

That was when a party of six military policemen descended on our table.

‘Are you the okes in the Land-Rover parked outside?’ demanded a gigantic sergeant.

‘Sarge,’ we affirmed resignedly

‘Waal, youse all under arrest,’ he grunted, ‘for leavink weapons unattended.’ Simpson, seeing our danger, immediately protested.

‘But sarge-ah,’ he wheedled, ‘we’ve just come back from the Honde Valley-aaah. How can you do this to us-ah?’

‘Youse on a charge,’ was the relentless reply,

‘Sarge-ah. Come on man. We were just going to get them now-ah. I tune you what-ah. We were going now-now-ah.’

‘Never marned that, youse just come with me.’

We stood up dejectedly and followed him outside.

It so happened that Military Police headquarters were next door to the hotel, and we were soon grouped in the orderly-room awaiting charges. But neither we nor the MPs had reckoned on the silver-tongued Simpson. He ranted away and demanded to see the senior MP. a major, and the sergeant finally succumbed and disappeared up a flight of stairs with Simpson in tow.

Though impressed by his showmanship we held out no hope at all for his success. We had committed a serious offence and we knew it. After being away for more than half an hour they eventually returned, and though the sergeant looked very serious I noticed Simpson’s eyes held in them a wicked gleam.

‘Youse okes is fockin’ lucky,’ the sergeant said. ‘You can orl go ... An’ don’t let me catch youse leavink weapons in the street again.’

We stared at him disbelievingly for a moment. Then realising we had really been released we scuttled out of the building and down to the Land-Rover.

‘What did you say to the major, for fuck’s sake?’ I demanded of Simpson.

He grinned. 'I just tuned him that the CO of RLI is my uncle, so it would be a waste of time charging us-ah. I tuned him that my uncle would let us off anyway'

'Oh balls, Simpson. Stop bullshitting.'

'S'true-aah. I just tuned him out-ah. The oke was eating outa the palm of my hand-ah!'

But however he had done it we were grateful and we very shortly continued our interrupted journey back to Salisbury. It was drunken trip, for we had smuggled a crate of beer and amused ourselves by tossing the empties on to the road behind. This was perhaps unwise, for following us all the way was a Police Land-Rover driven by a young police officer. At the Macheke Hotel where we stopped to buy more beer, to our dismay the police vehicle also pulled in.

But Simpson again came to the rescue and soon the young policeman was sharing a drink with us in the bar.

It was again outside the Cecil Hotel that some months later Simpson once more found himself in trouble. Having parked his vehicle he sauntered off into town, completely unaware that the two large cobs of dope he had stashed behind the driver's seat were protruding and thus in full view of all the pedestrians walking on the pavement.

A passing colonel spotted the cobs, seized them and waited for the culprit to return. When Simpson arrived back he was immediately arrested and put under extreme pressure to confess all. But once again his silver tongue came to the rescue.

Somehow he managed to persuade his guards that the dope had been planted there by a personal enemy... Couldn't they see that someone was trying to frame him?

The colonel eyed him suspiciously, but finally Simpson was released and the incident forgotten.

Life was certainly never dull with Simpson about.

There was a wide diversity of characters in 3 Commando. By tradition most foreign volunteers accepted by the RLI served in the ranks, and at one time I was the only born Rhodesian in 11 Troop. It was admittedly only running at half strength at that particular stage. Men from a wide variety of nationalities joined our ranks.

There were Americans of course, many of them Vietnam veterans resplendent with impressive arrays of medals. But we were not overly impressed by such dazzling displays and told them they looked like Christmas trees. Understandably, they ignored our taunts and wore their decorations with pride.

There were Canadians and Australians and New Zealanders, some of whom had fought in Vietnam. And we had Frenchmen, Belgians and Germans too, many of them ex-legionnaires.

Earlier on there were many South Africans, but their numbers began to dwindle as their own bush war intensified in South West Africa and Angola.

The majority of overseas recruits though, came from Great Britain and Ireland, from a variety of regiments like the Paras, the Royal Marines, the Special Air Service and the Brigade of Guards. The British adapted well to Rhodesian conditions and many served with distinction and were decorated for valour.

All foreign volunteers were in the main professional soldiers. It is true a few liked to think of themselves as mercenaries (or 'mercs'), but they weren't really ... If they had been they would have been soldiers 'without fortune', because they got the same pay and served under the same conditions of service as Rhodesian-born regular soldiers, and like everyone else paid income tax to the Rhodesian Government. Added to that they were allowed to remit only a small percentage of their salaries to their own countries.

The volunteers came for many and varied reasons.

For some it was the action and adventure. For others it was the glory. Many came in the belief they were fighting to stop the spread of international communism. And there were a few who were there just for the love of killing.

In the latter part of 1976 an enormous freckle-faced Brazilian, Dos Santos, joined the commando. He was nearly two and a half metres tall and built like a battleship. Dos Santos' curly ginger hair and boyish smile belied his sheer brute strength. I once saw him lift a full one-hundred kilogram gas cylinder on his broad shoulders and plonk it casually on to a truck – a task that normally took at least three of us to perform.

We greeted his arrival with satisfaction for he was only too happy to undertake the most strenuous tasks. It goes without saying that on fireforce he carried an MAG and he handled it like a toy.

Yet Dos Santos never abused his strength and he treated us as his comrades. But unfortunately he didn't have much respect for officers. They were aware of this of course and we were sure they would do whatever they could to get rid of him. He was 'dangerous' – he didn't 'fit'.

Their opportunity came towards the end of 1976.

Dos Santos was just too open when he smoked marijuana, which he genuinely did not regard as anything illegal. One day an officer and the sergeant major raided his tent and confiscated his bag of dope, and he was promptly placed under close arrest. They handcuffed the gentle giant to the wheel rim of one of the trucks to await the arrival of the military police who were coming from Umtali the next day to collect him.

Pondering the situation during the night he must have suddenly realised the implications of his predicament and like Samson in the hall of the Philistines, he wrenched the handcuffs from the wheel and smashed them open.

Roaming the camp he quickly discovered that the incriminating evidence had been put away in a metal trunk in the Orderly Room. He broke into the Orderly Room without difficulty, prised open the trunk and retrieved his dope. Then he fled into the bush, never to be seen by us again.

But we heard rumours of what happened to him afterwards. Apparently he managed to reach Salisbury with both the military police and the BSAP hot on his trail. They finally cornered him in a nightclub, but in the ensuing gun battle he escaped down a dark alleyway.

The last we heard was that he had managed to make his way back home to Brazil. We were all pleased for him.

Another Portuguese-speaking fellow was a swarthy little Mozambican named Ramos. His English was very bad and did not improve with time. But he was wiry and a canny soldier, and despite being only five foot three in height, like Dos Santos he too was an MAG gunner.

Ramos had a charming sense of humour and, quite unlike Dos Santos, was well liked by the officers and senior NCOs. During one muster parade at Mount Darwin in 1977 he appeared wearing a pair of home-made spectacles. He had crudely fashioned them out of rusty bits of wire and although there were no lenses he looked for all the world like a miniature Mahatma Gandhi. I think he was deliberately trying to bait CSM Fraser, who of course spotted him immediately

‘Ramos, just what d’you think you’re doing? D’you think you’re a bloody professor?’

‘Sir, my eyes are bad. Doctor he says I must leave army’

‘Oh, does he?’ said CSM Fraser severely. ‘Well if your eyes are so bad, I suggest you wear those spectacles for the next week and then maybe they’ll get better’

And so it was that for the next week Ramos had to wear his rusty spectacles during every waiting minute ... He was a truly ludicrous sight and a source of constant hilarity to the rest of us.



CHAPTER 11

My First Command – December 1976

W

hen Lieutenant Smith gave me command of a stick I felt very privileged that I had been chosen for this honour rather than another of my 11 Troop contemporaries.

Lieutenant Smith had been monitoring our progress since we had arrived in the commando. Occasionally while on patrol he would allow one of us to take control of the radio to see what our voice procedure was like. Sometimes he would split the patrol in two and allow me to take command of two or three men. It was these in-field situations that gave him the opportunity to assess our leadership capability – or the lack of it.

Since the day I was told at the officers' selection board that I lacked leadership potential I had accepted I would always be a plain rifleman. Because of this I had never in my wildest dreams thought I would one day be leading a stick of my own. Not unnaturally I was more than just pleased when Lieutenant Smith broke the news to me, and momentary visions of glory flashed through my mind.

My first assignment though, was far from glamorous.

The commando was based at Mount Darwin at the time. 12 and 13 Troops were put on fireforce duties, while 11 and 14 Troops were sent to guard white-owned farms in the Centenary East area. There had been a sharp increase in guerrilla attacks on isolated homesteads. I was disappointed. The chance of action on a white farm was remote as the guerrillas were usually based in the tribal areas and at any rate would generally only attack poorly protected targets.

Nevertheless, I was determined to acquit myself well.

Peebles was my MAG gunner and Berry and Loader my riflemen. I felt both relieved and gratified that they didn't seem displeased to be serving under me.

The trucks dropped us off at the farm we had been assigned to and disappeared down the road in a cloud of dust. Seven whole days on our own. It would be like a holiday.

‘Where’s the farmhouse?’ asked Peebles.

‘I dunno,’ said Berry. Maybe that’s it over there.’

He pointed at a large shack-like tobacco bam built of red brick.

‘Balls, man,’ laughed Loader. ‘Nobody would live in a bam like that. The farmers around here are rich.’

We looked about us again but still could not see a farmhouse.

Just then a white man and a woman emerged from the bam and walked over to us. Barefoot children clung to the woman’s skirt. My heart sank – this was not going to be the cushy number I had expected. These people were poor and struggling to survive.

The farmer’s name was Koos and his wife was Letitia. They were Afrikaners and spoke only a little English, but as with all Afrikaners their kindness and hospitality were second to none. What they had, they shared. They were delighted to see us and couldn’t thank us enough for staying with them.

We were shown to our quarters – a simple shed at the back of the building. But it was clean and we were soon comfortably settled. Letty made a large pot of rooibos tea which she brought to us together with huge plates of cakes and koeksisters, a sort of sugary syrupy confection a bit like a doughnut that is a speciality of the Afrikaners.

That afternoon I took the stick on a short patrol around the farm buildings and the labourers’ compound, more to orientate ourselves than anything else.

When we returned to the converted barn, Koos insisted we share a few beers with him. The house was large and spacious. There were no ceilings, and the tin roof creaked as it contracted in the evening cool. We had naturally brought our own rations along with us, but Letty was adamant we should share their stew with them. It was delicious and we relaxed in the old but comfortable armchairs after dinner.

I quizzed Koos on his farming activities and the attitude of his labour force, and asked him about any guerrilla incidents that had occurred on his property. He said things had just recently been fairly quiet. The last incident had occurred over three months before when a guerrilla gang had crossed the Ruia River, his northern boundary, burnt his tractor and broken into the

farm workshop. Koos and family had been away from the farm at the time, which was a stroke of good fortune.

I wanted to be conscientious, and in the next six days we patrolled on foot the whole two thousand acres malting up the farm. It was hard going, as much of the property was dense bush land running down to the banks of the Ruia River. We sweated and cursed as we hacked our way through the clinging bush that was almost like a jungle. But it was necessary – if the guerrillas were on the farm that was where they would lie up. I was finally satisfied there was no enemy presence and that there had not been since the tractor incident.

On occasions I felt I was too hard a taskmaster, as we often returned exhausted from the daily patrols. But no-one complained. It was good experience for me, particularly the map reading and the silent signals.

On the final night of our stay we were sound asleep in our shed when we were awakened by a noisy banging at the door. We immediately leaped from our beds, weapons at the ready.

But it was Koos and Letty. I rubbed my eyes and looked at my watch. It was one o'clock in the morning.

‘What’s the matter, Koos?’

‘Ag, nothing man.’ He was clutching a beer in his hand. ‘We want you to come over and have a party’

‘At this time of night?’

‘Ja, man! Kom, we’ll drink some beer.’

‘Now?’

‘Ja,’ Letty chipped in, ‘we can’t let you just go without having a jol.’

Refusing to take no for an answer, she grabbed Peebles by the wrist and dragged him to the sitting room where an ancient battery-operated gramophone was playing a scratchy Jim Reeves record. We felt obliged to accept their hospitality so the rest of us followed and reluctantly accepted their beers. Letty insisted she dance with each of us in turn while Koos stood by the record player, clapping to the tune.

At 0400hrs. we finally managed to take our leave from our generous hosts and staggered back to bed. I had felt very humble in their happy home. They were poor people, yet they were land and revelled in sharing the simple pleasures of life.

We were awakened at 0800hrs. the next morning by the sounds of army lorries coming up the drive. Lieutenant Smith had come to pick us up

and we were still in bed. My heart sank as he strode into the shed and took in the situation at one glance.

‘I’m disappointed with you, Cocks,’ he said frostily, ‘still in bed at eight in the bloody morning. I suppose you’ve been doing this all week?’

Still half asleep I made no reply and dejectedly gathered up my kit. We said our goodbyes to Koos and Letty and clambered on to the waiting vehicles.

Lieutenant Smith never mentioned the incident again, but I knew he was displeased. I felt I had let him down but I couldn’t bring myself to tell him we had really worked hard. I didn’t feel it right that I should try to justify myself. I was relieved of my position as stick commander and went back to being a rifleman. But two months later Lieutenant Smith relented and gave me back my command. From then on it became a permanent arrangement.

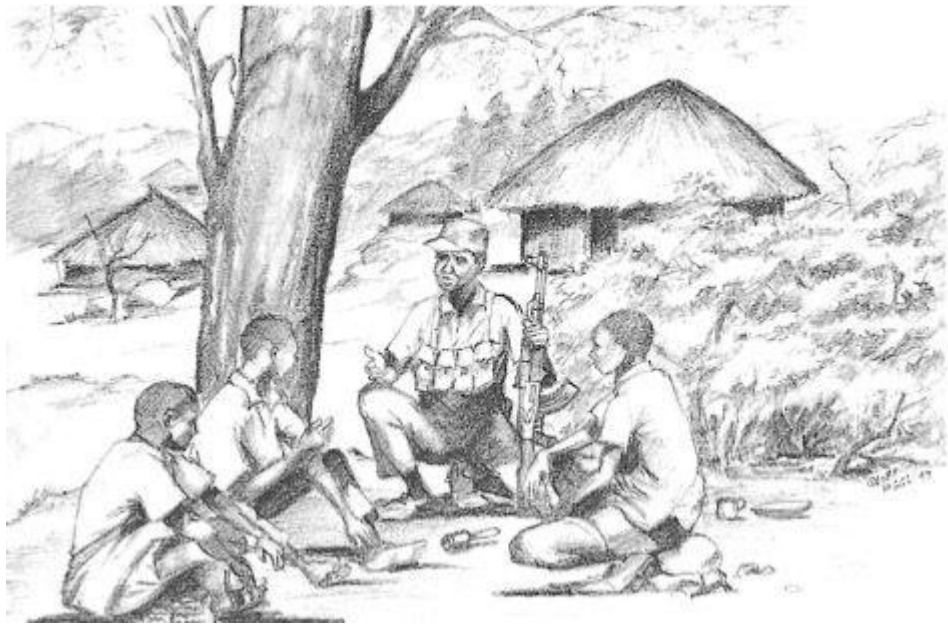


BOOK THREE

1977

THE ESCALATION





CHAPTER 12

The Civilians

T

here were many civilian casualties during the war.

The guerrillas' tactics were simple... Destabilise and gain control of the rural areas, and the towns and cities would fall like the proverbial ripe plums into their laps.

White farmers were important targets and many were killed together with their families. The object of course was to get them off the land, and these tactics often proved effective. The Mtoko area, for one, was totally abandoned by its once prosperous white farmers by the war's end. Other areas, like Mount Darwin and Centenary East, were also largely abandoned.

But in spite of their successes in certain areas, the white farmers in fact were of only secondary importance to the guerrillas. Their premier targets were the vast communal tribal trust lands where the majority of Rhodesia's black population lived. It was there the guerrillas established their bases, and it was there they were given food and information by the locals, whether voluntarily or, as was often the case, not.

The unfortunate local populace, or 'povo' as the guerrillas called them, were tom between the two sides of the conflict. If they sheltered and fed the guerrillas, their homes and livestock were destroyed by the Security Forces. If they refused to help the guerrillas or informed on them they were killed as 'sell-outs'.

Almost every day on radio and TV, Combined Operations Headquarters announced that a number of black civilians had been killed in the crossfire.

And indeed this was often the case... For who could know if a half-seen figure darting through the bush was a fleeing guerrilla or just a terrified civilian?

If one exercised too much caution fewer guerrillas would have been killed, and many more of our own men would have died.

If in doubt, shoot. It kept you alive.

It was war and atrocities by both sides were not uncommon.

The Rhodesian High Command always tried to adhere to the codes of decency laid down by the Geneva Convention, but the troops in the field tended to sneer at the idea. There were hardly proper rules to killing, except for legal executions ... So how could there be ethics?

The enemy had no such qualms anyway and used terrorism both as a strategy and as a tactic against the civilian population to politicise them and keep them in line.

In fact their reign of terror started as far back as the early sixties, at the time when the Central African Federation of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi) was in its death throes. Petrol bombs and bludgeonings were the order of the day at that time as the rival black nationalist movements competed for political dominance.

With the increased onslaught of the guerrilla offensive in the early seventies terror tactics became a way of life.

While the Rhodesians were naively getting bogged down in a campaign to 'win the hearts and minds' of the masses through peaceful means, the guerrillas were effectively negating their efforts by instilling terror into their black 'brothers' all over the country.

They worked on the principle that with a gun at his (or her) head or a knife at his throat, anyone will do anything he's told. At the time though the whites simply couldn't comprehend that the peasantry might actually have wanted to collaborate with the guerrillas.

Tribal victims murdered by guerrillas as examples to the rest came from all strata of black Rhodesian society. It might be a headman who had been seen talking to a passing Security Force patrol – a chief who objected to ZANLA abducting the children of his kraal for military training in Mozambique – a peasant farmer whose youngest brother just happened to be a police cadet – or a community services worker or an agricultural extension officer. It didn't matter... and in the case of the latter their bloody deaths were used to terrorise the very villagers they had come to help – or rather control.

The list was endless. No one was immune from guerrilla reprisals or vengeance, and to us there rarely seemed to be any real or substantial reason behind the endless atrocities and killings.

Why were innocent missionaries selected as terrorist targets? In general they were apolitical and classified themselves as humanitarian. And if they did have political leanings it was mostly towards the guerrillas anyway... It was common knowledge among the troops that certain mission stations, such as St Albert's Mission in the Mount Darwin area, were harbouring and feeding guerrillas.

How does one reconcile this with the senseless murder of eight British missionaries and four young children at the Elim Mission in June 1978? They were shot and bayoneted to death – and even worse. And there were others, like the seven missionaries 'executed' by guerrillas at Musami Mission in February 1977.

One could understand the motives for attacks on white farm homesteads. Farms were economic targets and the fanners usually served in the Security Forces in some capacity or other.

Their children didn't, though.

In December 1976, while 3 Commando was stationed in the Honde Valley, twenty-seven black workers at the nearby Katiyo Tea Estate were murdered by ZANLA guerrillas for no apparent reason. The guerrilla gang entered the workers' compound one night and rounded up most of the menfolk, many of whom were migrant workers from Moçambique, which made it all the more inexplicable. Then they forced the wives and children to watch while they systematically shot or bayoneted the workers to death.

Were they trying to teach someone a lesson? If so, what was the lesson? I guess it was to make the country ungovernable. They succeeded.

The morning afterwards Corporal Pudding was sent with a detachment of troops to assist the police and Special Branch who were investigating the massacre.

There was little they could do though, except shift bodies and tie identification labels on to wrists.

When Pudding returned to base that evening he was a long way from his usual jovial self. His normally happy façade had disappeared in the face of the honor and enormity of the massacre.

But that is history and the world didn't care... In any case the bodies have long since rotted.

Generally we in 3 Commando, and possibly the RLI as a whole, rarely witnessed guerrilla atrocities. When they happened we were not usually around.

For the guerrillas struck at 'soft targets', mostly where their power was seen by the locals as omnipotent, and even if we were in the vicinity it was the police who investigated and not the army.

On a few occasions while on patrol in the bush we stumbled on unrecognisable bodies. In the remoter areas there would be little more than bones left, picked clean by the jackals and hyenas and bleached white by the sun. Sometimes it was a stinking, decomposing mass strung together by a few strands of rotting clothing.

We rarely thought much about such discoveries. Maybe a wounded guerrilla had crawled away to die alone in the bush. Or perhaps it was a civilian murdered by guerrillas – or by the Security Forces. What the hell anyway – he was dead, wasn't he? Nothing would bring him back

I was a rifleman in Corporal Smith's stick in the early months of 1977. We had been sent on a patrol in the Mudzi Tribal Trust Land, just south of Mtoko.

The patrol had been fairly uneventful and we had just stopped for a late breakfast of tea and dog biscuits one morning, when the radio crackled into life. Humphrey van der Merwe, the MAG gunner, had just brewed the tea when Corporal Smith signalled for us to pack up and prepare to move out.

We cursed as we gulped down the scalding liquid and stuffed the mugs back into our packs.

'Jump around,' said the corporal, 'we've got to RV with an RAR stick in an hour's time. There's been trouble at a village just south of All Souls Mission.'

Some time later we met up with the RAR stick who were waiting for us at a major cross-roads.

We walked in single file en route to the village. Everything seemed pastoral and innocent. Herd-boys looked curiously at the hurrying patrol, but women washing laundry in a muddy stream scarcely glanced up as we tramped by.

When we got to the village, nothing seemed unusual. But then we noticed a disturbing kind of 'aura' which seemed to envelope the whole

place. It was inexplicable, yet somehow we all felt something was amiss.

Just outside the village Corporal Smith signalled us to move into an extended line formation. This we did, the RAR stick taking the right flank.

With a movement of his arm Smith initiated the advance and we picked our way forward warily. I remember being conscious of the noise my veldskoens made as we walked over drying mealie stalks in the small, tightly-packed plots on the outskirts of the village.

On reaching the first outlying hut Humphrey and I instinctively crouched behind the shelter of a mud wall, and I peered around the corner towards the centre of the kraal.

There was a distorted crumpled heap lying in the dust about twenty metres away and I felt certain it was a dead man.

‘Shit, Van, I think there’s a body over there.’

Humphrey peered over my shoulder.

‘Ja, it is,’ he confirmed.

His eyes quickly scanned the area.

‘Gook?’

‘I dunno... but I scheme it checks like a civvy.’

I glanced sideways as the corporal whistled softly, signalling for Humphrey and I to advance on the left flank.

Smith was crouched behind a small mango tree and I shook my head in the negative and signalled that there was a dead African male to our front.

‘What is it?’ panted Corporal Smith after running over to us.

‘There’s a dead munt over there.’

‘Look,’ nudged Humphrey, ‘there’s another. Check over there near that grain bin.’

The corporal and I peered in the direction indicated. He was right. It was a woman in a faded yellow dress.

Smith fumbled out a pack of Madison cigarettes and slipped one between his lips. He always lit a cigarette when tension was mounting.

‘Okay’ he said, breathing out a cloud of blue smoke, ‘let’s go.’ He signalled for the RAR sergeant on the right flank to cover us.

Humphrey licked his lips and tucked the MAG onto his hip. He flicked off the safety catch.

We walked in, expecting a burst of AK fire with every step we took. But nothing came and we tentatively inspected the carnage in the village.

There were six dead bodies, all black villagers. Four men, one woman and a baby. The baby lay face down in a bloody pool beside the half-naked body of his mother.

‘Jesus Christ. Just look at that,’ said Humphrey hoarsely. It looked as if he wanted to vomit.

The woman’s faded yellow dress was torn and bloody where it lay gathered up exposing her belly. As I looked down, involuntarily I took a sudden shocked breath and felt the bile rise in my throat

Her exposed private parts had been horribly mutilated.

As Corporal Smith and the RAR sergeant walked around silently inspecting the corpses I swished my rifle butt angrily at the buzzing swarms of flies feeding at the rims of every one of the multiple bayonet punctures, and when he got to me Smith muttered tightly, ‘What the fuck for? I just don’t believe it... Their own fucking people.’

All the cattle belonging to the villagers had been slaughtered as well.

A door banged and an RAR private emerged from a hut with an old woman who held a naked baby in her arms. The soldier gently took the whimpering child from her and her gnarled and toothless face showed no emotion as she let go.

She squatted down on the ground in front of Corporal Smith and the RAR sergeant.

‘Ask her what happened, sergeant.’

The RAR sergeant questioned her in Shona. With her eyes staring fixedly at the ground she told her story, gesticulating feebly with her bony hands to lend emphasis.

‘She says the vakomwana came last night and demanded food and beer. The village is poor and has barely enough food to keep them alive through the winter, but they were frightened so they did as they were told. The vakomwana got very drunk and soon began smoking dagga.

‘After a while the leader began shouting at the headman, who was very frightened. They then ordered the terrified villagers to gather around by the fires and watch while they tied the headman up with wire and forced him to kneel.

‘Then the terrorists killed him. But they did not let him die quickly. First they cut off his ears, and after that his nose which they made him eat. Finally they cut off his lips.

‘When they had done, they stabbed him many times with their bayonets.

‘She says the people were too afraid to make a sound.

‘Then,’ the sergeant continued interpreting, ‘they took the youngest wife of the headman. She screamed too much as one of them pulled her baby away from her. He gave another woman a stick and ordered her to batter the infant to death... What could the woman do? She hit the baby with the stick and killed it because she had no choice.

‘When the baby was dead they took the mother and raped her many times in front of every man, woman and child in the village.

‘And when they had had enough they bayoneted her to death also.’

‘And the rest?’ asked Corporal Smith grimly. ‘Why were they killed?’

‘She does not know why they were killed and neither does she know why the cattle were shot. She says the cattle were innocent and had done nothing. The people also were innocent and they had done nothing.’

We killed many civilians, though rarely deliberately. If there were civilians in a hut with a guerrilla sheltering in their midst, it was necessary to kill the civilians to get at the enemy.

Was this right or wrong?

Morally it must be wrong... but there is little about war that is right.

I remember an episode that occurred in the Operation Repulse area when we were involved in a contact on the edge of a kraal line.

An air strike had been called in and the bombs had reaped a terrible harvest.

When the planes left, the village was littered with dismembered and maimed civilians, mostly women and children, some dead and some still writhing in their final agony.

I saw the pathos of a naked black baby tugging desperately at its dead mother’s nipple, trying in vain to suckle.

When I look back it seems like a horrible dream.

For some inexplicable reason we were ordered to drag all the bodies to a central place, and I remember feeling nothing.

No joy... no hate... no sorrow. Just nothing.

My brain was numb.

I carried two dead infants and tossed them on the pile. They were so light that I carried one in each hand – upside down by the ankles, their little

arms dragging on the ground.

I have children of my own now and my perspective on life has changed. I have recurring nightmares about those children I flung on the pile. I want to turn back the clock. Like it never happened. Christ – I scream inside.

Although most of us rarely killed civilians deliberately, there unfortunately were a few exceptions.

I remember hearing of a machinegunner in Support Commando. While on patrol in a rural area he had come across a group of small children playing by a stream.

He shouted to them, trying to entice them with sweets to come over to him. Most were too afraid, but one little chap braver than the rest approached him.

For no apparent reason the machinegunner raised his weapon and shot the child dead. He thought it was funny.



CHAPTER 13

Mtoko – January 1977

M

toko is a rural village which served a small white farming community and the tribal districts of Mudzi and Nyamapanda. It is situated in the north-eastern corner of the country and after FRELIMO came to power in Moçambique it became an important infiltration route for ZANLA guerrillas.

In 1977 most white farmers were still living on their farms, stubbornly resisting guerrilla attacks on their homesteads. But the scale of the attacks was steadily escalating and, as has been said before, by 1980 the constant pressure would have taken its toll and not a single farmer in that area would still be on his land.

The commando was based at the forward airfield in the area, and the size of the base expanded rapidly with the influx of troops.

As was the norm, half of the commando operated on fireforce duties while the rest was deployed in the tribal areas, to man observation posts and to patrol the hundreds of kraals and riverlines on seek-and-destroy missions.

Patrolling sticks were usually deployed to drop-off points in trucks, driven by base personnel such as MT reps, the CQ staff or the signallers.

Our favourite drivers were Corporals Hudson and Duffy.

Although we ostensibly regarded them as non-combatant ‘jam stealers’, we were well aware that they were vital to the organisation. Also they were extremely helpful. Being the assistant Commando Quartermaster and the Commando Clerk respectively, Hudson and Duffy were powerful people indeed and worth cultivating.

If they didn’t like you, you could face problems. Extra rations and kit might prove difficult to obtain, and inexplicable delays could occur with leave applications and the payment of salaries.

Generally though, they had the troops' welfare at heart and we were always pleased when they met us with cold beers and cokes at the pick-up point after an arduous patrol... later this practice was stopped and it was forbidden to carry glass or bottles in vehicles, for broken glass became deadly shrapnel in a landmine explosion.

Being on the roads so often, Corporals Pudding and Duffy faced greater risks from landmines than anyone else in the commando. In fact during that particular Mtoko bush trip Pudding, while driving military vehicles, claimed the doubtful honour of detonating three landmines within a fortnight.

He was miraculously unscathed however, mostly due to Rhodesia's advances in mine protection of vehicles, and each time returned fearlessly to the driver's seat.

It was during the trip that Corporal Smith decided we ought to be trained in demolition, and in this he was ably assisted by Corporal Hulley

Corporal Hulley was an amazing character who had recently joined the commando from the British Army. Well into his forties – he had taken part in the Inchon Landings in Korea – his body had taken a battering during the course of his military career. His pencil-thin legs supported a frail and wizened torso, years of drink had taken their toll on a ruddy, capillary-ridden face, his hair was completely white and his head shuddered continuously with a nervous twitch.

Hulley's overriding passion was explosives, and his hands though gnarled could dextrously deal with any explosive or detonator. Together with Corporal Smith he gave us comprehensive lectures and demonstrations.

'Right you lot,' said Corporal Smith, 'today Corporal Hulley is going to teach you about the hollow charge. And in order to demonstrate correctly we are going to destroy a bunker.'

Listening with rapt attention, we eyed him suspiciously... Which bunker?

'And as we don't want to disturb any of the bunkers that you have so lovingly built, we are going to build a special bunker so that we can blow it up.'

We groaned in unison and Schoultz whined, 'But corp, can't you just show us the principles?'

'No, I want a proper bunker. So start digging!'

We cursed as we picked up our shovels and slowly set to work. But our lack of enthusiasm had no effect on our instructors who insisted that the bunker be built to perfection. This was no ordinary bunker. It had to be deeper and stronger than the others. It had to have more timbers and more sandbags... Otherwise how could Corporal Hulley properly demonstrate the effectiveness of his explosives?

‘This really burns my arse,’ complained Loader as he filled a sandbag. ‘Fucking Pommy idiots! Dig a fucking bunker and then blow the fucking thing up!’

But at last our masterpiece was completed. One by one we placed our bottles of plastic explosives on top of the roof, and as we detonated them one by one lethal holes were blown through to the bunker below... We had effectively been taught the principle of the hollow charge, and I for one was very impressed.

Then Hulley decided it would be a crying waste to leave the beautiful bunker still more or less intact, so next we were taught where to lay the charges and how to lay the cordtex and safety fuse.

At length it was all prepared and we watched with keen anticipation as Hulley, his hands shaking from the brandy he had drunk the previous night – or more likely that morning before breakfast, lit the safety fuse. In less than a minute the flame reached the cordtex. There was a deafening explosion and as soon as the dust settled we went forward to inspect our handiwork, and saw that our once beautiful bunker had been totally demolished.

‘Not bad,’ mumbled Hulley, I’ve seen better though,’

He loved booby-traps too and his blue eyes sparkled as he passionately demonstrated how to make and set these evil devices... But his days in the commando were numbered.

He was just too old and could barely keep up with the younger soldiers. Apart from that he and the sergeant major hated each other, and the final crunch came when the CSM discovered that the corporal was trying to booby-trap his bed. Within hours the enraged sergeant major had Hulley transferred back to Salisbury, where he assumed an administrative post in Base Group with the rank of trooper.

There was a callout and much general excitement.

A Selous Scout observation post had sighted a column of over two hundred ZANLA guerrillas infiltrating the country, just north of the Nyamapanda border post.

I was in Corporal Bob Smith's stick, Furstenburg was the MAG gunner and Peebles the other rifleman.

We were on the second wave.

The first wave went to the chopper pad and was quickly airborne.

I suffered a brief moment of anxiety when I was hit by the sudden realisation that there were only twelve of us going into action against two hundred plus guerrillas. Lieutenant Smith to some extent set my mind at rest when he briefed us that the Air Force was sending in the Canberra bombers first. It had to be serious, we decided, if the Canberras were being used to soften up the opposition before we'd even arrived.

There was a hubbub of activity as the second, third and fourth waves loaded their kit on to vehicles.

We were told to go as fast as possible by road to Kotwa airstrip near the border.

The CSM shouted orders as we sweated and strained to load on to the trucks forty-four gallon drums of avgas (aviation fuel) that was to be used to refuel the helicopters.

Drivers started their engines and we climbed aboard.

'11 Troop, are you ready?' yelled the CSM.

'YESSIR: bellowed back Corporal Smith.

'Well, what the bloody hell are you waiting for? Get going!'

Corporal Smith banged loudly on the roof of the cab, as a signal for the driver to go.

A tarred highway led to the Moçambique border and within half an hour we were at Kotwa. Apart from the airstrip there was nothing else there but a lonely Internal Affairs keep. A few black district assistants were leaning against the eastern wall of the keep, but they didn't seem the least bit interested in us.

We formed up in our sticks and waited for the helicopters – and waited.

An hour later the consensus of opinion was that we would not be collected and we became agitated. It was very frustrating, believing we were about to miss out on some really good action.

I tried to listen to Corporal Smith's radio transmission but that didn't help. The contact was taking place near the Mazoe River to the north, which was outside our radio range.

We heard a rumbling roar to the north and took it to be the Canberras returning to Salisbury to replenish their loads... Well, at least it wasn't a lemon.

'Lemons' were our bugbears.

Many was the time that we were called out by inexperienced or jittery OPs to a suspected guerrilla presence, only to find they had been mistaken and the supposed gang of guerrillas was an innocent tribal beer party – or even a funeral procession.

Ten minutes later we were still nursing our frustration when a Dakota came in and landed with a screech of tyres on the strip.

When it lumbered to a halt twenty heavily encumbered paratroopers clambered out on to the strip. We watched them walk clumsily into the shade of the wings and collapse on the ground. Obviously they were exhausted and I looked them over curiously. It was the first time I had seen combat paratroopers and I was intrigued.

They were the Special Air Service, and we somehow felt inadequate in their presence... The SAS were the real professionals.

Things had to be really serious if they'd brought them in.

Some of our men dozed off, using their webbing as pillows, and our spirits sank even lower. It seemed we weren't going to be needed after all... The Canberras were doing it all by themselves.

After a time our pulse rates slowed back to normal and we began to accept we would soon receive disappointing news.

Peebles was chewing on a piece of grass and I was lighting a cigarette when the radio suddenly blasted into life.

'Stop Six... this is Yellow Section... ready for uplift,' came the calm voice of a helicopter pilot.

Our minds and bodies sprang back to life in an instant. We snatched up our webbing and grabbed our weapons, filled with relief as we listened to the throb-throbbing of approaching helicopters becoming momentarily louder.

Soon they were there above us, and we turned our backs and crouched down to shield ourselves from the storm of dust and stones generated while they landed.

Fifteen minutes later we were over the contact area along the banks of the Mazoe River.

The pilot experienced difficulty finding a suitable LZ, so we had to deplane while the chopper hovered about three metres above a rock-strewn clearing.

We jumped out and landed okay, all except for Dave Peebles who had the misfortune to sprain an ankle. We couldn't leave him behind of course. In any case he insisted he was capable of keeping up with the rest of us and hobbled along gamely despite being in obvious pain.

I was immediately struck by the surrounding silence. Even the K-car was operating too far away to the west for us to hear it. It seemed as if we were the only stick in the vicinity, and we felt lonely and suddenly vulnerable.

'Stop Six... this is Three Nine.'

The silence was broken by the major transmitting on the radio.

Corporal Smith reach for his handset.

'Stop Six... Go.'

'Are you on the river?'

'Affirmative.'

'Okay, I want you to sweep down the river for about two kays.'

'Copied.'

Bob took a quick drag on his cigarette.

'You'll find a large tributary on your right. Give me a shout when you get there,' said the major.

'Copied.'

Bob flicked his cigarette into the river and signalled us to form a sweep line.

We fanned out, about ten paces apart, and when we were in position Bob nodded and the line began to move cautiously forward.

Paul Furstenburg and I took the right flank, away from the river where it was rockier and harder going, and Peebles was on the left flank by the river. The going was easier there, but even so I was still concerned about his ankle.

This was the moment of truth. We were stepping into the unknown and I felt my nerves tingling as my forefinger gently caressed the trigger. Morbid thoughts raced through my mind – I could be dead in a minute or so and not even know that it had happened.

I licked my dry lips, glancing at the comforting figure of Corporal Smith to my left. Our dressing was okay, that was something.

I plotted my immediate route ahead, but there didn't seem to be any obvious danger and I strained my eyes, peering into the bush, looking for anything untoward.

Some grass flicked suddenly in the breeze, my heart jumped and I raised my rifle.

Look for cover all the time.

Cover for you... cover for the enemy.

Never forget, not for a single moment. It might be your last.

Where would you head for if you were shot at... now... if it happened this very moment?

We came to a large open vlei and stopped, scanning the ground ahead.

Corporal Smith crouched and signalled that I should go first, and I sprinted across the vlei, bent almost double, my heart in my mouth.

I expected every second would be my last as I tried to anticipate the enemy bullets. But they never came... Not that time anyway.

I reached the tree line on the far side of the vlei and took cover behind an anthill.

When I was satisfied I signalled that all was clear to Corporal Smith, and the rest ran over to join me, Peebles hobbling along in the rear.

Two hundred metres further on, Furstenburg was shot at.

It was a frightening volley of AK and SKS rifles.

As I ducked instinctively I saw Furstenburg drop into the cover of a shallow ditch.

Without even steadying his MAG he returned fire in a long sweeping burst, and I sprinted over, trying to ignore the whip-like cracks above my head.

'Get another belt,' Paul yelled above the fury of the onslaught as I slid into the ditch next to him, gasping for breath.

I fumbled his pouch open and ripped out a belt. The empty links of the expended belt dropped from the gun as Furstenburg expertly reloaded, then slammed the top-cover shut and cocked the action in one movement.

He immediately recommenced firing at the guerrillas. They were holed up no more than five metres from our position and I yelled in shock, 'Jesus fucking Christ – they're right next to us!'

I poked my FN over the lip of the ditch and began shooting like a man possessed.

This is ludicrous, I thought. They must surely kill us. The noise alone will kill us. Suddenly I noticed Corporal Smith to my left.

He seemed utterly calm.

There was a white phosphorus grenade in his hand and I saw him glance casually through the long grass as he examined the ground ahead. Then, pulling the pin he tossed the grenade to the far side of our ditch. It exploded in a sharp 'boof, spewing lines of phosphorus into the air, and I shrank down in the ditch.

Oh shit, now we were being taken out by our own phosphorus!

A few burning blobs landed nearby, causing the green grass to smoulder and hiss as I rammed in a fresh magazine and continued firing. I was only vaguely aware that searing-hot spent cartridges from Smith's FN were hitting me in the ear as I fired.

The superiority of our fire-power eventually told, and after what seemed an interminable further two minutes the enemy fire from the far side of the ditch ceased.

I peered cautiously into the smoking grass.

There was no movement.

After a while we cautiously stalked forward and discovered four dead guerrillas, their bodies mangled and bloody. Burning phosphorus hissed and spluttered as it burnt into the still warm, oozing blood.

'Jesus, look out!'

We spun in alarm at Furstenburg's urgent warning.

Two RPG-7 rockets had spilled out next to one of the bodies... and they were smoking and smouldering ominously

"Let's get the fuck out of here!"

We scrambled backwards, single-minded in our effort to get away from the expected blast.

Our hearts beating frantically we waited – and waited. Then we waited some more. But still nothing happened. Corporal Smith eventually decided we would be safer on the far side of the river and we crouched down and quickly waded across.

Still nothing.

The dead guerrillas were visible from our position and Corporal Smith told us to shoot at the rockets to detonate them. But though we fired round

after round we couldn't get a hit at that range. Most of our shots repunctured the harmless, already well-punctured bodies of the dead guerrillas and were wasted.

'For crying in a bucket,' snorted Corporal Smith disdainfully, 'can't you wankers shoot straight? I'd hate to have you lot at Bisley'

Ten seconds later the rockets obligingly blew of their own accord. The detonation was impressive and we felt the earth shudder in sympathy around us... We didn't bother to return to re-check the bodies. There would be little left worth checking.

This marked the end of the contact as far as we were concerned. We learned the full story only when we got back to Mtoko. The Canberras had gone in and dropped their anti-personnel bombs as planned. But the guerrilla columns were far too strung out for the effects to be as devastating as was anticipated.

And of course the enemy had immediately bombshelled, malting further bombing attempts futile.

The first wave of fireforce troops achieved a limited success, but by the time the second wave had been positioned the enemy had scattered over a wide area. That made successful engagement almost impossible, mainly because of our comparatively small numbers on the ground.

In spite of this fifteen guerrillas had been killed... But at least another one hundred and eighty five had evaded us and were still at large within Rhodesia.

The implications for the future were horrendous.

Every evening we ran. Fitness was of extreme importance and when back at the base the entire commando, officers included, ran over ten kilometres. This was a personal nightmare for, as always, my flat feet caused me great discomfort.

I could walk great distances in the bush without any problem, but running was another story.

To make things worse, occasionally the major would turn nasty and order anyone who had not completed the run within the specified time limit to go out and do it over again.

Because of my handicap I was invariably outside the limit so I frequently would have to restart the hated run.

At times I felt utterly hopeless, certain I was a ‘waster’ – that I was a failure as a commando.

One thing used to help though. We always sang or chanted while we were running and the words did much to lift our flagging spirits.

Colour Sergeant Norman or Hugh McCall usually led the songs. McCall had adapted his US Army chants to the commando.

The chant leader would sing a line which the squad would then repeat.

*Hold your head up, hold it high,
.....Hold your head up, hold it high,
3 Commando's passing by.
.....3 Commando's passing by.*

*(Choras)
Lor, lor, lor-ra lay
Lor, lor, lor-ra lay.
Lor-ra-layi
Lor-ra-layi.*

*If I die on the ol' drop zone,
Box me and send me home.*

*Place my wings upon my chest
Tell Ian Smith I did my best.*

*Lor, lor, lor-ra lay
Lor-ra-layi.
Blue job, blue job, don't feel blue,
You can join the commando too.*

*They always say, so it's been said,
A policeman's badge is made of lead.*

*They always say, so I've been told,
A commando's badge is made of gold.*

There were plenty of verses and variations and an imaginative chant leader could keep us singing happily for many kilometres. Not even the omnipresent CSM screaming at us continually to keep in step could detract from the mesmeric chants.

Happily as the war intensified and the callouts increased, the PT and running diminished accordingly. There was simply no time. I was truly thankful. From a personal point of view it was preferable to face the guerrillas and their bullets, rather than the anger of the CSM and the agony of my flat feet.

Whilst at Mtoko I saw my first blue movie. It was a momentous occasion and the entire commando crammed into a smoky and poky Air Force hut, all eagerly awaiting the treat to come.

The ancient projector cranked into life and we glued our eyes to the white sheet hanging on the wall. The black and white film was probably as old, if not older than the projector – older than us.

Ladies clad only in cellulite with crowning glories of beehive hairdos wafted slinkily across the crumpled screen, servicing droopy-eyed, flabby roués smoking an endless succession of Gauloise cigarettes which seemed to endow them with amazing stamina.

It was a silent movie, and comments from the audience came fast and thick.

‘Christ, look at that one. He’s got a left-hand thread worse than Ramos!’

‘Is that your mother, sarge?’

‘Piss off Loader, at least my mother doesn’t wear stick boots.’

‘Your mother’s only been fucked twice – once by the RLI and once by the RAR!’

‘Jesus, that thing’s worse than a donkey’s!’

In less than twenty minutes the film had ground to an end, and as the lights were switched on we looked around in sudden embarrassment, wondering what to do next. Many of the lads had rampant erections and

refused to move, preferring to sit it out cross-legged. The senior NCOs laughed heartily at their discomfort.

Another, even more high-powered distraction was a troupe of strippers who visited us from Salisbury.

A large marquee with an improvised stage was set up for the show and the troops filed in and took their seats on the benches filled with hopeful – if mostly ignorant – anticipation.

The officers and sergeants stood at the back. They'd seen it all before and knew the score. We sat down, each with a personal stock of beers stashed by our feet. We had no intentions of having to leave for resupplies in the middle of the show

The atmosphere was electric and the buzz of excited conversation more than rivalled that of an eagerly-awaited theatre opening night. A tall peroxide-blond lady in stiletto heels and a leather miniskirt swayed on to the stage through a flap in the canvas. A cigarette dangled from her pouting lips as she languidly put a Donna Summer record on to the turntable. Though it was badly scratched it was also provocative, and the crowd roared with enthusiasm as the music commenced. The heavily made-up siren turned voluptuously and blew a kiss at Scott, who was sitting vulnerably in the front row.

The crowd roared even louder.

The pulsating disco beat that had signalled the start of the show continued and the blonde now began to move slowly in time with the music. After a few moments she danced off the stage and began to undulate through the audience. A particularly sexual gesture, made right in the blushing face of a young trooper, brought howls of excited laughter from the rest of us.

As the music pounded away she gradually removed her clothes, item by item, and tossed each garment into the crowd. The stripper was soon completely naked barring her stilettos. She flirted outrageously with each man she selected, nibbling and kissing, stroking and wriggling suggestively, her every action egged on by cheers and howls of encouragement.

Then a particularly shy-looking soldier was selected and dragged reluctantly on to the stage where he was subjected to the hot ardour' and sexual attentions of a second stripper who had come in from the wings to join the first.

She unashamedly thrust her pelvis into the trooper's face, then squirmed and gyrated. Her actions soon brought the inexperienced and acutely embarrassed soldier to a hasty and shuddering climax, and the men cheered wildly as, bent almost double, he shuffled scarlet-faced back to his seat.

While this was going on the first stripper performed an amazing feat with a beer bottle. It caused the astonished troopers to gasp in awe and the applause was tumultuous when the bottle finally disappeared entirely from view

Finally the lights dimmed, and the music came to an end signalling the end of the performance. Most of us felt completely exhausted. Only Sergeant Taylor, pretending to hide a yawn, quietly sneaked off to the girls' dressing room.



CHAPTER 14

Parachute Training – February 1977

D

uring the middle of a Mtoko bush trip, we were suddenly told that 11 and 14 Troops were returning to Salisbury for parachute training.

At first we didn't believe it. We knew a troop from 1 Commando had been para-trained in November 1976 but we had thought this was only for experimental purposes. However with the shortage of helicopters there was only one other way to rapidly deploy troops into a fireforce action – by parachuting them in.

It transpired that the 1 Commando experiment had worked out well. Therefore it had been decided to train the whole battalion.

We felt honoured that 3 Commando had been selected to go first, particularly as 11 and 14 Troops were leading the way.

Not everyone was thrilled with the idea however.

Loader was terrified but said he would try.

Smit, the MAG gunner, was also terrified and said adamantly, 'I'm not going. If God had wanted us to fly he would have given us wings.'

Lieutenant Smith tried to reason with him. But Smit stubbornly refused to go and the Lieutenant was left with no choice. So Smit was posted out of the commando. I was very sad to see him go.

When the day came we found ourselves at a large hangar at New Sarum Air Base, where the Parachute Training School was housed.

The instructors were a happy bunch. There were Rhodesian, British, American and Australian PJIs, and unlike Training Troop, there was no malice in their training methods.

Their job was to teach us to jump... in as short a time as possible.

Our training was both extensive and comprehensive. We learned how to land -the mysteries of side rights, side lefts, front rights and back lefts. They taught us how to exit the Dakota and the drills while still inside the

aircraft. We were shown how to guide the lift webs during descent and how to operate the reserve if the main 'chute failed to open... Everybody paid particularly strict attention during that lecture. It was important.

Some of the lads were already para-trained. Furstenburg for example had his Special Air Service wings, and Hugh McCall had served in an American Airborne Division.

It was old hat to them, naturally, and of course they took every opportunity to tell us so.

'Listen sonny' McCall used to tease, 'I was in a T-10 harness before you were in a T-shirt!'

At last came the big day for our first jump.

We boarded the Dakota nervously, the packs comfortable but still somewhat alien on our backs, and sat down along the sides. Then the Dakota gathered speed down the runway and took off, and we climbed sedately to a thousand feet. In my stomach a million butterflies felt as if they were moving a lot faster than the plane itself.

We were to jump in sticks of two and we waited for the word of command.

Suddenly it came.

'STAND UP... HOOK UP... CHECK EQUIPMENT,' bawled the instructor.

The roar of the slipstream outside the open exit door almost drowned his words.

I rose and hooked the clip to the overhead static-line cable. It was just like the drill... except this time it was for real.

I checked my equipment – quick-release box secure and clipped in... reserve secure... lift webs comfortable.

The assistant despatcher came forward and gave us a final check. When he was satisfied he returned to his position at the door.

'ACTION STATIONS,' yelled the instructor.

I shuffled forward to the door and put my right hand on the cowling above it to steady myself. My left hand was firmly across the reserve on my chest.

Both my hands were sweaty and I realised I was biting my lips.

Smit had been right. It was unnatural.

I glanced at the instructor. He winked and flashed me a broad grin and I smiled back nervously.

Would I remember everything I had been taught?

When exiting the aircraft, jump out and not down... look straight ahead... keep your feet together.

‘STAND IN THE DOOR!’

The red light flashed on.

Two steps forward... ‘One two.’

The slipstream buffeted and distorted my face.

Green light on.

‘GO!’

I leaped out, both arms across my reserve.

I was immediately struck by the exhilarating force of the slipstream as it tossed me around like a feather behind the Dakota. Had I done everything I’d been taught to?

There was a sharp crack above my head as the parachute opened, and I gazed up with relief at the large expanse of material billowing into a green mushroom above me.

So far, so good... But everything seemed to be happening too quickly.

Remember the drills!

Head tucked in... knees bent... elbows in. The ground rushed up at a frightening speed.

Pull down hard on the lift webs and prepare the angle of your body to land with the wind direction.

Crunch!

I landed with a hard jolt, but rolled into a side right in the manner born. Suddenly I realised that apart from a few bruises I was all right.

My first jump was over.

A newspaper photographer snapped his camera at me as I gathered in the folds of my parachute, and the next day in The Herald there was a picture of me which I cut out and vainly pinned on my locker back at barracks.

Eight jumps and we were qualified paratroopers.

It was one of the proudest moments of my life when I was awarded my wings and on our return to the bush we were regarded with envy by our comrades.

However jumping operationally, we soon discovered, bore little relationship to the halcyon days of training.

The Rhodesians kept paratroopers in the air for as short a time as possible, so as to offer little target opportunity to the enemy on the ground. To achieve this we were supposed to be dropped from a height of five hundred feet. But in reality it was usually lower.

On occasions we were inadvertently dropped from altitudes of less than three hundred feet, which gave the parachute barely enough time to open before the ground rushed up to meet you.

Rhodesia was rough country so invariably there was a lack of suitable drop zones in a contact area. This left the pilots with no choice but to drop us into treed areas or on to rocks, and jump casualties were often high... especially when a strong wind was blowing.

Encumbered with bulky webbing and an awkward machinegun strapped to one's side, it could be a frightening experience.

Sometimes we jumped with CSPEPs attached to our web straps. CSPEPs are large containers or packs that dangle below a paratrooper. They are not only extremely heavy, they also are difficult to jump with as they tend to sway and disrupt the parachute's course.

It is small wonder that RLI paratroopers referred to themselves as 'meat bombs'.



CHAPTER 15

Enlistment For Three Years – February 1977

A

t the time of the Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 the length of national service for whites, coloureds and Asians was four and a half months.

By the time I was drafted in 1976, just eleven years later, national servicemen were spending a year in the army, and after completion of their compulsory service, the men were transferred to territorial battalions.

Most ranks in territorial units, from the commanding officer down to the most junior rifleman, were citizen soldiers... and by the latter stages of the war territorials were spending six weeks in their jobs as civilians followed by an army call-up of six weeks. No sooner had they adjusted to becoming civilians, they had to readjust to becoming soldiers again.

Many of them understandably became resentful of the enforced call-ups and morale and cohesion suffered badly in some of the units.

But the regular volunteer units such as the Rhodesian Light Infantry never lost that cohesion because of a stricter disciplinary code. More importantly, we were in the main volunteers – we wanted to be there.

However by the mid-seventies the RLI was forced, because of the shortage of volunteers, to accept conscripts, and by 1976 there were more conscripts in the RLI than regulars.

When I was conscripted in 1976 I looked on the year ahead as a long and daunting one.

At the end of that year for me lay the prospect of a university education in England. But to a boy of eighteen one whole year seemed like an eternity.

In May 1976 the length of national service was increased from twelve to eighteen months. It came as a bitter blow for most, especially those on the verge of completing their twelve months. There was very nearly a mutiny by the conscripts of Intake 146 who were told on their last day of service that they had an extra six months to serve. I had rarely witnessed such anger.

A few university entrants were fortunate enough to be granted exemption from extra service, but I was not. I was told that as English universities only started their academic year in September I could serve the eighteen months and still go to university in September 1977.

Having no alternative I made the best of a bad job and resigned myself to the situation. I determined to enjoy as much as possible the rest of my service... which in my case was not wholly irredeemable.

I had soon been befriended by the regulars and the older soldiers of the commando and they accepted me as an equal. (Some national servicemen, however, were never accepted by the regulars and they led miserable lives as a result).

Having been accepted as one of them, it wasn't long before the regulars began pressuring me to enlist for a minimum three-year term.

Schoultz was the major campaigner.

'Chris, when are you going to sign on?'

'I'm not'.

'Kak, man, you're praating kak, ek sê. You can't just go and be a territorial wanker. You'll get culled.'

'I wanna be a civvy'

'What for? They're all arseholes.'

'No they're not.'

'They are. They're all fucking shit scared of us!'

The truth of his perverse logic couldn't be denied and a brief silence would follow.

Lieutenant Smith was another powerful advocate and he regularly harangued me.

'Cocks, when are you going to sign on? We're going to be needing a few stick leaders soon.'

'I'm not, sir. I'm supposed to be going to university soon.'

'That can wait man. I reckon if you signed on you'd soon get a stripe.'

'Thank you, sir, I'll think about it.'

But it was the camaraderie (and flattery) more than my comrades' incessant persuasion that finally decided me. In February 1977 while on para training, I finally succumbed and drove with Schoultz to the recruiting office in the centre of Salisbury.

There he introduced me to his brother (a sergeant major) and I signed on the dotted line for a three-year contract. This, as I had completed a year's service already, left me with just under two years to go.

As I had foreseen, my parents were utterly mortified that I had forsaken a university degree for the doubtful privilege of another two years in the army.

They accused me of being influenced by some rather dubious mates and the *joie de vivre* of serving in an elite regular commando battalion a transitory fad... and it was true.

Today, over ten years later, I sometimes look back and contemplate the wisdom of that decision. I realise now that it changed the entire course of my life. But whether it was for better or worse I still cannot decide.

At the time however my view was myopic.

I was given substantial back pay, dated from the day I had joined the army (a regular soldier's salary was four times higher than that of a conscript). I also became eligible for a host of special allowances such as a special unit allowance, a living out (of barracks) allowance, a parachuting allowance, a daily bush allowance and a star allowance.

A soldier received a star grading on a scale of one to five; the higher the grade the greater the allowance.

Whatever its source it still added up to a lot of money for a nineteen year old.

I still do not fully comprehend the irony of my situation then.

I was vaguely opposed to Ian Smith and his policies, yet here I was serving as a regular trooper in one of his most effective strike units.

I do not believe I had any blood lust. It was just a big adventure which slowly began to turn sour when I discovered that upwards of forty thousand people had been killed in the conflict.

'What the fuck was it all for?'

That is the bitter sentiment generally heard today and I cannot even try to answer.

In 1977 I was just a young man – a boy, and in all wars it is always the youngsters who are caught up in the fights of the fathers – not of their own

making.



CHAPTER 16

Lowveld and Moçambique – May 1977

I

n the Autumn of 1977 the commando was posted for the second time to the Lowveld in the south-eastern corner of Rhodesia.

ZANLA guerrillas had gradually extended their areas of operation, which now included this vast tract of wild and inhospitable bush.

The Lowveld had become increasingly important. There was a danger of guerrillas infiltrated from Moçambique severing Rhodesia's vital arterial road and rail links with South Africa, and in 1976 the Rhodesian High Command declared it a separate operational area – Operation Repulse.

The nerve centre for Operation Repulse was a vast military base at the Buffalo Range airport which served the towns of Triangle and Chiredzi the two main centres in the Lowveld.

We were not unhappy with the posting and the A-frame barrack rooms were airy and comfortable. We even had proper beds!

The social life at the Triangle and Chiredzi clubs was good and we looked forward to lots of drinking and, hopefully, to lots of womanising as well.

However our hopes and enthusiasm were short lived, for no sooner had we established ourselves in the barrack room than Corporal Smith walked in.

‘Right you lot, listen in.’ We paid close attention. When Corporal Smith said this, it invariably meant something ominous.

‘At 1400hrs. you will fall in. Lieutenant Adams has something interesting to tell us.’

After he left the room began to buzz in anticipation.

Lieutenant Adams was the 12 Troop officer, so what on earth did he want with 11 Troop? Why couldn't we be briefed by our own Lieutenant Smith?

‘I bet it’s a bloody op’, complained Doug Loader.

Doug hated Lieutenant Adams, although I don’t think as much as Lieutenant Adams hated Doug.

He was a poor specimen of a human being and was considerably older than the rest of us. He had made three unsuccessful attempts to get into the army but hadn’t even been able to make the medical category ‘S’. On his fourth attempt, having begged, pleaded and cajoled he was finally signed on by a sympathetic recruiting officer.

But how Doug had landed up in the RLI was a mystery. At least he had a good sense of humour and we admired him for that. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Adams didn’t share this admiration. The lieutenant didn’t like misfits and I think that if Doug had been in 12 Troop he would have been discharged long before.

What really added fuel to Adams’ acute dislike of Doug was that Doug shat himself every time he para jumped.

Yet in spite of this he still came back for more.

‘I’m not going on ops with that cunt.’ threatened Doug.

‘He wouldn’t take you anyway, you waster,’ jeered Furstenburg.

‘Fuck you, you Jewish cunt,’ retorted Loader.

Paul Furstenburg was a veteran. He was forever reminiscing about the ‘old days’ when he’d operated in ‘Porkers’ (Portuguese East Africa – Moçambique) with the SAS. He still wore his SAS wings – which irritated us. But in spite of his ‘war stories’ he was likeable enough.

Born in Rhodesia of German-Jewish extraction he became alternatively Gemían or Jewish, depending which nationality suited him at the particular moment.

He also ate pork – to say nothing of the vienna sausages and processed ham (‘pig’s twat’) in the rat packs.

‘Don’t you realise you’re eating pork?’ I sometimes asked him.

‘It’s not pork, it’s beef,’ he’d say, popping another sausage into his mouth.

‘Look at the can, you stupid Jew. It’s produced by Colcom and they only deal in pork products.’

‘They don’t, they also do beef

‘Bullshit.’

I decided to prove the point and in my next letter to my mother I asked her to phone Colcom and clarify the question. Sure enough she wrote back

to confirm that Colcom viennas were most certainly made entirely from pork.

I produced the letter victoriously and waved it under Furstenburg's nose.

'There, read that. The bloody things are pork and Jews aren't supposed to eat them.'

He read the letter then tossed it aside, refusing to believe it. 'It's all a Gestapo plot – all kak'

He also claimed he was directly related to Princess Ira von Furstenburg... and so far as any of us were aware he might well have been.

'I'm royalty you know' he would boast.

'So what went wrong with you Furburger?' I would enquire.

'Ja – Princess Ira would really be proud of you Paul,' quipped Loader. 'A real success story... cashiered out of the SAS, junior gobby machinegunner and now an insult to Judaism. Fucking useless cunt... no... you're not even a cunt – they're useful. You're a zunt – a cunt with a zip.'

Strangely enough Furstenburg and Loader were great friends in spite of the continual insults they traded.

Loader's bed was near the window of the A-frame barrack room and one evening Furstenburg staggered into the barrack room, and blind drunk, tumbled on to his bed. A few minutes later he decided he needed to relieve himself and reeling over to where he thought the window was, he urinated with enthusiasm over Loader's vacant bed.

Loader staggered in a few minutes later. Even in his drunken stupor it did not take him long to realise the warm liquid saturating his bed was urine. Certain who the culprit was and thoroughly enraged, he ineffectively flailed his fists on the unconscious form of his 'royal' friend.

Two nights later the situation was reversed.

Furstenburg was sound asleep in an alcoholic stupor when Loader staggered into the barrack room and decided he too needed a pee.

Ripping open his flies he urinated for what seemed a very long time over the prostrate figure of Furstenburg who was snoring in oblivion and didn't wake up.

The first thing Furstenburg noticed the next morning was the overpowering smell on his body and his bed. Accusing Loader of the foul act he cursed vehemently... ..but Loader innocently denied everything as he couldn't remember a thing.

Early in 1977 Schoultz decided that a few of us from 11 Troop should move out of the camp, rent a house and run it as a mess.

It seemed like a good idea and Furstenburg, Charlie Norris and Pete Gamett also were keen.

Trevor, ever resourceful, managed to find the perfect house near the barracks. We duly moved in and for a while everything seemed ideal.

After a month at Mtoko, Furstenburg applied for leave, and as he would be returning to Salisbury it seemed sensible for him to take our rent money back and pay it to our landlady. So I approached the others and collected enough money for three months' rent. We ourselves wouldn't be going back for a while and it seemed eminently reasonable to pay the rent in advance and not have to worry about it thereafter.

Two and a half months and two bush trips later we were happily sitting in the living room drinking beer and smoking a joint when I happened to glance through the window and saw a pleasant looking, middle-aged lady carefully negotiating the messy quagmire that had recently been a lawn until Schoultz somehow had managed to bog down an army truck in it.

'I'm so sorry to bother you,' she said apologetically having finally arrived at the house, 'It's about the rent,'

'The rent?... Don't tell me it hasn't been paid?' I asked aghast.

'Well no. Actually you're three months in arrears.'

We cursed and muttered, promising to murder Furstenburg and deliver his wretched carcass to the poor landlady. She was surprisingly kind-hearted and we were not evicted. But after some discussion we reached an agreement with her that we would move out at the end of the R and R.

So back to barracks it was.

When confronted on his return Furstenburg flatly denied we had given him the money.

We hurled abuse at him but never actually hit him. It really wasn't worth the effort. He was so stupid he believed his own lies.

Lieutenant Adams addressed us, a supercilious smile on his face (as always). He was a tall man with red hair and freckles. Apart from being an excellent soldier he was a stickler for discipline and correct military procedures to the point of being obsessively fastidious. (One could therefore understand his pathological hatred of someone like Loader who was so obviously 'unclean'. If one cannot control one's own bowels, what on earth can one control?) He didn't like us as he considered soldiers from

all troops other than his own as incompetents – we hadn't been privileged enough to have been shown the errors of our' non-12 Troop ways.

'Right, I want you to consider this as a warning order,' he said, '11 and 12 Troops are being deployed into Moçambique for two weeks by helicopter on a seek-and-destroy mission. Zero hour will be 1700hrs. tomorrow. Orders for stick leaders will be at 1800hrs. this evening. I suggest the rest of you start getting your kit in order.'

'Smarmy cunt,' Loader muttered,

Adams paused for a moment, glowering at us.

'Water will be short, so I suggest a minimum of twelve water bottles per man. You can draw any extra bottles you need from the quartermaster... I really think we might make soldiers of you yet!'

He glanced at Loader.

'Yes, even you Loader.'

After he left everybody cursed and moaned.

Twelve water bottles! They'd weigh a bloody ton.

The CQ issued us with Bergen packs, the extra water bottles and enough rations for two weeks. We also were all given several spare A-63 radio batteries to carry as well as extra MAG belts for the gunners.

Poor Rob Scott was allocated the heavy 60mm mortar tube, while the rest of us had to carry two mortar bombs each.

I turned to Griffin who would be my bivvy partner for the next two weeks.

'Griff, give us a hand with this damned pack.'

He helped me lift it on to my back and I couldn't believe how heavy it was... How the hell am I going to manage? Let's hope we have a few contacts soon, I thought morosely, so we can get rid of the mortar bombs and the MAG belts quickly.

'I thought we were supposed to be light infantry – not fuckin' donkeys,' swore Botes.

He was a national serviceman who couldn't wait to be demobbed and Frank Neave, recently of the British Paras, taunted him.

'Oh, you'll love it. Why don't you sign on and become a real soldier?'

'Fuck that,' objected Simon Mesham in support of Botes, 'we're not stupid like you dumb regulars.'

We sat guzzling Cokes and eating chocolates – luxuries we would not see again for two long weeks and that evening we flew by helicopter across

the border.

Once into Moçambique we saw few signs of habitation. Intelligence had said the guerrillas were using the power-line cutting as a communications route through the bush. Therefore our orders were to patrol the line and look for signs of either FRELIMO or ZANLA.

The massive electricity pylons stretched for as far as the eye could see. All the way from Cahora Bassa hydro-electric scheme in the Tete Province of Moçambique, right down to South Africa.

Soon after we arrived I paced the distance between the pylons and calculated we were marching up to twenty kilometres per day.

‘What a bloody waste of time’, Botes complained when after a week we still hadn’t seen any signs of the enemy,

I didn’t blame him. It was backbreaking work and it seemed just as futile to me.

‘Typical fucking army – let’s all look forward to the next fucking pylon!’

‘Ja... and when we get to Cahora Bassa, that ginger cunt will make us turn round and come back again... in case we’ve missed one out.....CUNT.’ added Loader.

The vegetation was reasonably lush so there was never a shortage of shade. We slept well too, as there were a lot of us and we didn’t have to do a lot of guard duty.

It was on the ninth day that we contacted FRELIMO.

We had stopped for a smoke break at about 1000hrs. and a few of the more energetic blokes had started to brew up.

Griffin and I were beneath a large mopani tree on the perimeter of the position, about three hundred metres from Lieutenant Adams. We had removed our packs and I, foolishly, had discarded my webbing which lay about three metres away from me.

It was a mistake that could easily have cost me my life.

The FRELIMO cadre and I saw each other simultaneously.

I stared at him and he stared at me, both in utter disbelief. Where in the fuck had he come from?

‘Griff, I think FRELIMO has arrived.’ I said softly.

Griffin sat up and aimed his rifle at the man.

‘Go on, shoot!’ I hissed.

Griffin squeezed the trigger, but nothing happened.

A stoppage.

The FRELIMO cadre, realising the danger, turned to flee, and simultaneously I snatched up my rifle and fired a double tap.

Amazingly enough one of the bullets found its mark and the Mozambican soldier dropped like a stone, shot through the forehead.

‘I got him Griff,’ I said in disbelief as I grabbed my webbing and quickly shrugged it on.

My shots had raised the alarm and the other troops opened fire at a fleeing FRELIMO patrol.

Within a minute the mortar came into action and mentally I congratulated Rob Scott on his alacrity.

Lieutenant Adams was galvanised into action and ordered us to give chase, which we did for about three kilometres. But we had no further sightings.

The FRELIMO had obviously run off like men possessed and we stood no chance of catching them. So we returned to our packs, collected them and withdrew. But not before Hugh McCall had booby-trapped the body with a grenade. (We heard the ‘boof that night).

The rest of the patrol passed fairly uneventfully, though we found a few kraals with evidence of FRELIMO presence which we put to the torch after looting them. I discovered a few tins of Russian sardines in one of them and Griffin and I enjoyed a memorable dinner that night.

Sad to say my friend Griff was killed in a car crash during his next R and R.

When we got back to Buffalo Range, Major Strong congratulated us on our joint efforts during the debriefing and spoke to me personally afterwards.

‘Well done. Cocks,’ he said with a smile. ‘Bit of a sharpshooter, eh!’

‘Oh, it was nothing sir,’ I replied nonchalantly.

We next took over fireforce duty, while 13 and 14 Troops under Lieutenant Cronin went off on a similar operation to the one we had just completed. This time they were further to the north and I rather unkindly took the opportunity to taunt my friends in the troops who were going... ‘Don’t worry, it’s going to be really shit,’ I said. ‘All that bloody walking... how many pylons did we do Harry?’

Lieutenant Cronin, an American Vietnam vet (though he never spoke of his experiences), was one of the characters of the commando. He was a strict disciplinarian if the need was there, but he rarely resorted to strong-arm tactics and was popular with all the men. 13 Troop was particularly fond of him.

He always brought his golden Labrador, Lucy, on bush trips and the dog was as popular with the troops as her master. One day, some wag scribbled some graffiti on the latrine wall. It read, 'Lucy fucks bulldogs' and Cronin happened to read it.

One morning on muster parade, he asked the sergeant major if might be allowed to address the troops, then embarked on a long litany about his dog. It was very well bred, he said, and did not copulate with bulldogs and the culprit who had written such slander would rue the day he had done so, because the entire commando was sentenced to an extra half an hour of pokey drill... We laughed. The extra drill was well worth the humour.

Lieutenant Cronin was awarded an MFC as a result of an action during that patrol in Moçambique.

The two troops had arrived at a major dirt road running north-south, that looked well used. No sooner had they reached it when they heard sounds of a Unimog approaching. Lieutenant Cronin ordered his men to take cover, but not to open fire until he gave the command. This was because he did not feel the patrol was as yet in a good enough ambush position.

When the vehicle got near they saw that ten FRELIMO soldiers and two Red Chinese advisors, dressed in Chinese combat fatigues were aboard.

But no order came to open fire.

The men were frustrated at losing such a ripe target, but Lieutenant Cronin was convinced the truck would return so he accordingly set up an ideal ambush.

His patience was rewarded when two hours later they heard the Unimog returning. The ambush was set at a small, sandy drift, to negotiate which the driver would need to engage first gear.

Finally the vehicle came into view. The ten FRELIMO were still aboard but the Chinese were not... they were lucky.

The Unimog slowed as it reached the drift, and at that moment Lieutenant Cronin stepped into the road and signalled vigorously to the driver to stop.

‘Halt,’ he shouted. ‘Surrender or we’ll open fire!’

He had told Corporal Hodgson that if any of the Moçambicans reached for their weapons, he must immediately take out the driver with his sniper’s rifle.

This would signal the rest of the patrol to open fire.

The be-goggled driver immediately stopped the vehicle and for a few brief seconds of confusion no one moved. Then in the back of the vehicle a soldier reached for his AK.

Immediately a shot rang out from Corporal Hodgson.

As the driver slumped over the steering wheel, shot in the centre of his goggles, the bush around erupted in a crescendo of gunfire.

Less than ten seconds later the rest of the FRELIMO soldiers were dead.

Meanwhile, at Buffalo Range we had not been idle. With only two troops operating the fireforce, there was no respite from the daily callouts.

We ranged as far afield as Bikita in the north and Chibi in the west.

ZANLA had begun infiltrating into the very heart of the country and our tally of operational parachute jumps mounted steadily.

Even so, while the days belonged to the guerrillas, the evenings were our own, and we were seldom too tired to dash off to the clubs at Triangle and Chiredzi where we were given a warm reception. Unfortunately a short time later after a fight broke out, we were banned from the Triangle club.

John Connelly might have had an Irish sounding name, but he spoke with a broad, although well educated, Cockney accent.

He was older than the average troopie and balding, but beneath his outwardly sloppy manner and droopy, ginger moustache lurked an intelligent man. He was highly qualified and had some sort of chemistry degree, but he made a fetish of hiding his education. Formerly, he had been a British Royal Engineer, and the only thing he really gave a damn about was soldiering.

Connelly was not loud or boisterous and he rarely raised his voice. Yet he was a dominant type of person and had no difficulty in quietly establishing his authority without having to stoop to intimidation.

While on operations in the bush he was the epitome of a cool professional. But his behaviour and social etiquette were appalling.

My first introduction to him was at Buffalo Range. He was a member of 12 Troop which happened to be sharing a barrack block with us, and we soon discovered that in spite of his solitude, Connelly was an exhibitionist at heart... We learnt this when he took to masturbating in public.

We would be lying on our beds after a lunch period, reading or playing cards and hoping the siren wouldn't sound.

Connelly would be on his bed, reading a pornographic magazine while gently massaging his exposed penis.

'Connelly, what are you doing, you filthy pervert?'

'I'm wanking, what does i' fuckin' look like?'

'How can you do that in public? It's disgusting,'

'Well, don't look'

'We can't help it. All we can see is your horrible, big purple prick.'

'Luverly, innit?'

He carried on, happily massaging away and nothing we said would dissuade him.

Then we got used to his obscene habit and ignored him, tending to think of it as showmanship rather than perversion. This worked temporarily and he took to masturbating beneath his blankets.

But the old Connelly would immediately re-emerge as soon as a new batch of recruits arrived to join the commando.

The fresh-faced, young soldiers would stare in utter amazement at the horrible spectacle confronting them, their eyes agog and mouths agape – and I didn't blame them. It wasn't a pretty sight.

During the major raid on the ZANLA main base at Chimoio in Moçambique in November 1977 John Connelly was badly shot up by the 20mm cannon of a K-car which had mistaken his 12 Troop stick for a guerrilla group. He was riddled with shrapnel and bullets, having been hit in the arms, legs and chest. It was many months before he recovered and he was fortunate he didn't lose his life.

The original running battle between Goss Condon and I, and Dave Simpson re-emerged when he was promoted to lance corporal... much to the bewilderment of us all.

Simpson immediately renewed his vendetta with a vengeance and began freely handing out countless charges to the troopers, his favourite

target being Goss whom he would frequently catch climbing through one of the windows of the A-frame barrack rooms at Buffalo Range.

We all did this, as it was a convenient short-cut to the canteen. However the CSM had said it was illegal and anyone caught doing it would be charged.

As a result, Simpson nominated himself the window custodian.

His patience was well rewarded and he caught offenders by the dozen, the most usual recalcitrant being Condon.

Then one day the Buffalo Range Corporals' Mess tent burned down. The real cause of the disaster was never established. Significantly though, a couple of days before the tragedy the members of the Corporals' Mess had all decided that Lance Corporal Simpson was not worthy of eating in the mess because he had the manners of a pig.

Corporal Pudding pronounced sentence and Simpson was told that until he could learn to eat like a civilised human being, he would have to eat outside, using an upturned beer crate as a table.

Everyone laughed and jeered at him as he crouched by his crate like a leper that first evening. But there was the hint of a funny smile on his lips.

He was still smiling the next night, after the Corporals' Mess was burned to the ground. He alleges to this day that he had nothing to do with it. (Well, he would, wouldn't he?)

Whilst at Buffalo Range we met Pires. Another Portuguese Army veteran from Moçambique, he had served in the Portuguese paras. In fact one of the only English words he knew was 'parafronter' and he was immensely proud of it. He was a great big, barrel-chested man with a droopy walrus moustache and sad doe-like eyes. He was known as *He Pa!* or *Senhor Pára-quedista* (Mr Paratrooper). He tried so hard to fit in and would give everything his total effort – even baseball, which was as alien to him as the English language. We'd deliberately let him bat on, even when he'd struck out – just to see his intensely ungainly dash to first base. Barrel chest heaving, he would turn and smile proudly at us as we tried not to collapse laughing.

Somehow Pires found out that I was something of a tattoo artist. He began pestering me for a tattoo and wouldn't let up until I agreed. He wanted a huge parachute tattooed on to his chest – from breastplate to navel and from nipple to nipple. My techniques were crude – two sewing needles tied together with thread and a bottle of Indian Ink. Oblivious to my

warnings about the pain, he was insistent -so I finally succumbed. Dare I say it, he had an excessively oily skin and thus it was a very painful and time-consuming operation. He bore it without as much of a whimper. After all, he was a *pára-quedista*.

When it was finished he would strut around the camp open-shirted, proudly showing off the parachute and thumping his barrel chest. I felt bad when two weeks later the whole thing went septic – very, very septic. (I'd never had a tattoo go septic on me before). He was forced to go to the Doc for treatment. Somehow CSM found out about it and as a result poor Pires was charged with causing a self-inflicted wound.

Pires' grand finale took place at a farm dam in Cashel on the eastern border, whilst the commando was preparing for an external operation into Moçambique. After our evening run on the first day at the farm, we all took off for a swim in the dam which was at a very low level. Cavorting in the shallow, muddy water which was only about two feet deep, Lt Thornton, Paddy Povall and Dave Simpson noticed that Pires had sauntered on to a jetty which was about twelve feet above the water level. The three 14 Troop men gently subsided on to their backsides until the water level was at their necks. It looked like they were standing.

With shouts of "*He Pa! Dive in – it's beautiful*", the *pára-quedista* leapt off the jetty into space, executing a perfect swallow dive. I can still picture his entry as the poor man literally pegged himself into the mud – in considerable agony.



CHAPTER 17

Detention Barracks – July 1977

W

hilst at Buffalo Range I had the misfortune to accidentally discharge my pistol.

Everyone passing a parachute course was issued with a 9mm Star pistol. This was because a man in a parachute harness is vulnerable when his weapon is strapped into the harness and he cannot get at it.

The pistol therefore, was carried on the outside of his harness to make it easily accessible, and a few men did have cause to use them in difficult situations. For some reason, apart from a very brief lecture from Corporal Smith, we were given little instruction on how to use them.

Also, having an issue pistol meant an extra weapon to clean, for the Stars were also subject to weapons' inspection on morning muster parade.

It was while I was cleaning mine that the accident occurred.

The Star is notoriously awkward to strip and assemble and can only be cocked and cleared when a full magazine is actually inside the weapon. Somehow, that day I managed to reverse the procedure and inadvertently pulled the trigger while a round was in the chamber. I simply wasn't concentrating.

There was a reverberating report.

Silence.

Everyone turned and looked at me in mute pity.

The silence was broken by the hurried entrance of the CSM. Like an avenging angel.

'Who the bloody hell was that?' he snapped.

'Sir'.

I stood up as if in a dream. I knew I was off to DB for twenty-eight days.

'You stupid bloody fool!'

He was not so much angry at me as he was that the commando was about to lose a man for a month.

You know what this means, don't you?' Furstenburg asked after the CSM had left.

I nodded despondently.

Trevor MacIlwaine was already in DB for having had an AD with his MAG ten days before. He'd loosed off four rounds that had gone between the legs of Corporal Grant Hughes, fortunately without castrating him. (Although many said it wouldn't have made any difference).

Pete Garnett attempted to lift my spirits.

'Twenty-eight days in the box, in the box... Twenty-eight days in the box,' he chanted childishly. 'Don't worry Chris, you'll get over it.'

I tried to smile.

Sergeant Major Fraser returned five minutes later.

'Cocks, Orders with the colonel at 1000hrs.'

I groaned inwardly. The camp colonel was a territorial and TFs generally didn't like regulars.

I'd been hoping to go in front of our major who would have been more sympathetic. Unfortunately, although a territorial the colonel was the senior officer, and etiquette therefore demanded I appear before him.

Feeling really depressed I looked to see where the round had gone. The pistol had been pointing at the floor when it had gone off, but the bullet had smashed into my guitar which had been lying next to my bed.

This really added insult to injury, but fortunately I discovered on inspection that the guitar was not seriously damaged.

At 1000hrs. I was dressed in drill order and waiting outside the colonel's office, with Sergeant Major Fraser and Colour Sergeant Norman as my escorts.

The CSM tried to be helpful. 'Whatever you do, look to your front and don't look at the colonel,' he advised, just as a tired-looking territorial adjutant appeared at the door.

'Right, bring him in.'

'Orders... by the front... qu-ick... march. Leftrightleftrightleftright... right wheel... left wheel... orders – HALT.'

Three pairs of boots crashed to the floor in unison.

I glanced at the colonel and immediately disliked him. He was elderly, he was scruffy, and his alcohol-sodden face appeared both bored and

annoyed.

The charges were read out by the tired adjutant.

‘Have you anything to say for yourself, Trooper Cocks, before I pass sentence?’ he asked.

‘No sir.’

‘Where did you aim the weapon?’

‘At a passing cloud outside the window, sir,’ I lied,

‘Humpf,’ he grunted.

He then proceeded to tell me how irresponsible I was and how I could have killed someone.

I ignored him. I knew what was coming and there was nothing I could do about it.

‘Trooper Cocks, I sentence you to twenty-eight days detention. Orders dismiss.’

We marched out and the CSM told me to have my kit packed and ready by 1500hrs. I was to be transported to Salisbury in an Air Force Dakota.

I was furious and bitter, and I ranted at my friends in the barrack room, ‘It’s bloody wrong. I get twenty-eight days just because I’m a regular. Those territorial wankers have accidental discharges every five minutes and nothing ever happens to them. It’s because they’re civvies, that’s why. And what happens when an officer has an accidental discharge? Fuck all! It’s treated as a big fucking joke.’

What I said was true and everyone there knew it. They also knew that it made no difference. How I despised that old man dressed up as a colonel.

I found I was to spend the next four weeks in the company of Troopers Hawtrey and Wentzel, both of 13 Troop, who had also just been charged and found guilty.

Three nights prior, they had gone to the Air Force pub at Buffalo Range and had got very drunk. With the bravado of booze they had decided it would be a good trick to steal a Dakota and fly it to South Africa. They staggered across the apron unchallenged and boarded a fireforce Dak. Neither had ever flown an aeroplane, but by watching the pilots in flight they’d picked up the rudimentaries.

They first removed the chocks then entered the plane. Having lifted up the steps they were busily going through pre-flight checks when a black Air Force guard noticed that something was amiss.

The ailerons on the Dakota were flapping violently

Wide-eyed with fear, he fired a warning shot in the air and the flapping stopped immediately... This was not out of fear or caution, but because Wentzel had fallen asleep behind the controls.

The shot raised the alarm and Air Force personnel came running out from the pub. They quickly assessed the situation and shouted at the two reprobates to give themselves up.

Hawtrey, realising the game was up, managed to wake Wentzel and they stumbled to the door, hands in the air, to find themselves confronted by numerous rifle barrels all pointing at them.

‘What are your names?’

‘Which unit are you from?’

Hawtrey ignored the questions and began giggling uncontrollably.

Wentzel was more serious.

‘You’d better shoot me now,’ he said huskily. ‘I’m a Cuban spy’

‘Be serious,’ said an Air Force man. ‘Which unit are you from?’

‘You’d better bloody shoot me now,’ he still insisted. ‘I tell you I’m a Cuban spy’

They could get little sense out of the inebriated would-be pilots so they were dragged off to a shed and locked up for the night, Wentzel still pleading to be shot as a Cuban spy.

After being sentenced, they spent three days locked up in a corrugated-iron hut near the barrack rooms. I thought this an excessive and unnecessary punishment in view of the heat, but at least we managed to smuggle them some cigarettes and cool drinks.

The three of us spent the first two nights in the cells at the RLI barracks in Salisbury where we were treated reasonably well. At least we didn’t have to do any physical work.

Charlie Norris, in the meanwhile, had contacted my parents and told them the bad news.

They were horrified and my mother came to the cells to visit me. She was very upset and asked if there was anything she could do to help. I said there was nothing.

I was firmly entrenched in the military establishment and there was no way of getting out.

She’d bought me a carton of Camel cigarettes which my grandmother had sent up for me from South Africa. I foolishly took them with me to the

Detention Barracks in Bulawayo where they were stolen within an hour of my arrival.

Hawtrey and Wentzel kept my spirits up for those two days in Salisbury.

On the third day we were sent to Bulawayo by train, escorted by an RLI regimental policeman. He was nice enough and obviously didn't relish the task, but he insisted on handcuffing us to the metal frames of the bunks at night.

'I'm sorry' he explained, 'but I have to. Two ouens from 1 Commando took the gap last week and the RP guarding them has really dropped in the shit.'

We took no offence, but we spent a very uncomfortable night as a result.

He'd brought a bottle of brandy along and he shared it with us. I was grateful to him for that.

We arrived at the Bulawayo railway station on a bleak and windy Monday morning. We wore neither berets nor stable belts because convicted men were not allowed to wear regimental insignia. In addition, my wrists had been cuffed together.

It was ridiculous. Here I was being treated like a criminal when all I'd done was have a lousy accidental discharge.

It was not easy carrying luggage with both my hands in cuffs. I felt very awkward and the civilians at the station glanced at us and then looked away quickly, as if we were pariahs.

After a long wait, when a Military Police Land-Rover finally arrived we said goodbye to our escort and were bundled aboard. We were then driven to Brady Barracks and taken to the detention area.

It was a forbidding place and I was immediately struck by the lack of vegetation.

There were no lawns, no flowers, and no trees.

To complete the general dreariness of the scene the barracks were surrounded by a twelve-foot high, corrugated-iron wall with barbed wire on top.

The dour-looking commanding officer, Lieutenant Murray, registered our arrival and allocated our cells, and within an hour we were fully integrated into the camp routine.

It was to prove a strenuous, boring and repetitive experience.

Roll call at 0500hrs. was followed by PT. Afterwards, we cleaned the cells and the barrack block, and then had breakfast. Next came inspection, firstly the cells and then us on muster parade. After that, was drill, which was conducted only at the double.

Following this was PT again, and after that the assault course.

There was a half-hour break before lunch when we were given the opportunity to wash our clothes. But I always spent this time relaxing. During the twenty-eight days I served, I refused to wash my clothes... they were filthy, but who really cared? My little statement.

After lunch, we were put on labour, which meant digging holes and filling them in again. As a variation, the MPs made us carry the soil (at the double) to a point over a hundred metres away, dump it, and then carry it back to the holes.

The MPs never stopped shouting at us and abusing us.

We quickly learned to ignore them.

After more hours on the assault course, more drill and more PT, it was time for supper which was followed by cleaning.

How everything shone and gleamed around those detention barracks!

The evening polishing sessions were not strenuous and often we were able to sneak into a cell for a forbidden cigarette. Officially we were allowed only four cigarettes per day, one after each meal, and another just before lights-out.

Wentzel and I managed to wangle the job of cleaning the MPs' canteen every morning after breakfast, and this was indeed a privilege. Warm dregs of leftover-beer were quickly swallowed, as was the odd tot of surreptitiously stolen spirits. Cigarette butts, discarded during the previous night's carousing were gathered up and smoked down to the filters... I found it amazing how much of a cigarette was left unsmoked by our guardians.

However this much sought-after duty lasted only six days.

More than a third of the inmates in the barracks were from the Rhodesian Light Infantry. There were about twenty of us, six of them from my own commando.

Alan Hein was locked up yet again. It was his sixth spell there and the MPs knew him well.

He would report for sick parade every morning, and more often than not convince the doctor he was ill. In consequence, he was on light duties

for the entire twenty-eight days I was there.

During one sick parade he actually managed to escape. But he was picked up in Bulawayo three days later, and for this prime effort he was sentenced to one week in the 'dark cell'. It was a punishment I dreaded, but it didn't seem to worry Hein. He had obviously spent a lot of time in there and felt quite at home.

The dark cell was much as it sounded. There was no furniture – not even a mattress – and there was no vestige of any form of light. The one interesting feature was a hole in the floor which served as a latrine.

The only time the unfortunate inmate saw another human being was when a small hatch at the foot of the solid steel door was opened, and a hand pushed through a plate of cold food. The cell was also bitterly cold, particularly as prisoners were not allowed blankets and were dressed only in their underpants.

Muster parades, though often humorous, were shambolic affairs.

At 0600hrs. every morning some sixty or so military prisoners would line up on parade. The frosty winter winds were blowing at the time and our shaven heads felt very exposed.

Staff Sergeant Du Plessis took the inspection. He was a great brute of a man, with little piggy eyes set ludicrously close together in the lump of flesh that formed his head.

We were convinced he was illiterate. Many was the time a soldier would come up to him with a medical report after appearing on sick parade, and more often that not, the report would say the soldier was malingering.

Hein was a master during such scenes.

'What's this?' Du Plessis would say, the piece of paper clutched in the great hams of his hands.

'Sick Parade report, staarff,' answered Hein. 'It says seven days light duty'

The piggy eyes perused the paper in apparent concentration, folds of flesh knitting together on the expanse of his forehead.

'Humpf,' he grunted after a long time.

'They need someone to help in the cookhouse, staarff,' hinted Hein.

'You fockin' RLI, you always fockin' sick. Y'all fockin' wasters.' He also had a limited vocabulary. 'Oright, go'n report to the fockin' cookhouse.'

Staaaarfff!

Hein executed a perfect about-turn, and slowly and deliberately marched off in the direction of the kitchens, A man on light duties was excused doubling.

‘Hein,’ Du Plessis screamed, ‘swing those fockin’ arms shoulder high.’

Hein exaggerated the movement, looking like a windmill as he strode off.

‘Don’t you fockin’ RLI even know how to march proper?’

On one muster parade he walked slowly up and down the ranks, counting the boots.

Hein lifted one leg.

After he’d finished, Du Plessis put his hand on his head and seemed greatly perplexed. From this, I deduced he could only count in even numbers.

He repeated the procedure, this time taking it more slowly, presumably to ensure that every soldier had two legs.

Finally satisfied there were the correct number of bodies, he inspected each man individually.

He approached me, and scanned me up and down as if I was a cockroach.

‘728352 Trooper Cocks, staaarff,’ I bawled. (I’d had a new number allocated when I signed on.)

‘What you here for?’ the piggy eyes focused on me.

‘Ay Dee, staaarff.’

‘Fockin’ typical. Fockin’ RLI can’t even handle a fockin’ weapon.’

‘Staaarff,’ I shouted in acknowledgement.

He moved on to Wentzel.

‘727965 Air Vice Marshal Wentzel... .staaarff,’ gabbled Wentzel.

The staff sergeant obviously hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

‘What you fockin’ here for?’

‘Stealing a Dakota, staaarff.’

Du Plessis had been told about this episode previously, and he genuinely thought it funny. At least he had a sense of humour tucked away somewhere.

‘Aagh, one of those fockin’ pilots,’ he mused. ‘Tell me, why you so fockin’ dirty? Don’t they teach you to fockin’ wash in the RLI?’

‘No staaarff, we don’t have time. We’re too busy fighting the war, staaarff.’

We always tried to rub it in that we were combat troops while the MPs were ‘jam stealers’.

‘Fockin’ RLI. Think you’re fockin’ war heroes, don’ youse?’

‘We are, staaarff!’

Every day was the same – the same counting of the boots and the same witty, verbal exchanges. After each carbon-copy inspection in the cells, we ate breakfast watery ponidge and greasy, rubbery eggs. Then the physical work began. Everything was done at the double. This included drill, which consisted of five simple movements.

‘Squad, by the front... DOUBLE MARCH.’

‘Left wheel.’

‘Right wheel.’

‘Mark time,’ pronounced ‘Muck ti... em ...mah.’

‘Squad HALT.’

In effect, all this meant was that we ran around in circles for three hours a day.

The assault course was not taxing unlike the difficult one back at the RLI barracks and it only took ten minutes or so to complete a circuit. But we did about twenty circuits a day. PT was also simple – press-ups, sit-ups, star jumps and running on the spot.

Running on the spot was a popular exercise with the MPs as they didn’t have to think too much about words of command.

Apart from the mindless boredom, I found the doubling tiring and the effort began to tell on my feet which became swollen and painful.

I decided to report sick and was given three days light duty.

Hawtrey had also reported sick and was given light duties for a supposed bad back

We jubilantly reported to the staff sergeant and handed him the sick reports. Our luck, however, was short-lived. Unfortunately Du Plessis was in a bad mood. Not overly enamoured with RLI at the best of times, for his own good reasons he was even less so that morning.

‘Fockin’ RLI. Always sick and snivelling. I’ll fockin’ teach you.’

And Du Plessis did.

For the entire day we were made to stand to attention facing the corrugated-iron wall, our noses a few centimetres away from the metal. It

was a living agony and I was hard-pressed not to faint. But I stuck it out, refusing to give the MPs the satisfaction of watching me faint or give in.

If we moved, they sadistically clubbed us in the ribs and it seemed as if the ordeal would never end, as the glare from the tin burned into me.

Needless to say, I never reported sick again,
A victory for Du Plessis.

The nights at Brady Barracks were morbid. We were locked in our cells at 2100hrs. Reading was forbidden and our heavy slumbers were often interrupted by the wardens who continuously switched on the lights to check through the peepholes that we were still there.

It was a time of reflection, and I would lay on my bunk, feeling very depressed. For some reason Barbara Streisand's song 'The Way We Were' kept coming to mind. It is a sad song and I hummed it softly to myself as I thought about life in general. I also thought about my companions in DB.

There was a wide cross-section of inmates, originating from every unit imaginable. Some were only in for fourteen days. But a few long-termers were there for three years. A couple of coloured soldiers were doing two years. They had evidently stolen an ammunition truck and gone AWOL, then while drunk and drugged, they had rolled it and had been caught.

Two men from 1 Commando were serving eighteen months.

They had returned late for duty after one R and R, and had been given twenty-eight days. But at Gwelo, while under escort to Bulawayo, they had given their escort the slip and had jumped train.

After stealing a car they drove to Salisbury. Here for a few days they indulged in much alcoholic celebration, and it didn't help their cause when the police, after finally catching up with them, discovered a large quantity of grass on the back seat of the stolen vehicle. Talk about going down in style.

After a dishonourable discharge, they were escorted to DB wearing leg irons and handcuffs. These were not taken off for the first month.

After the first twenty-eight days, the long-termers generally had an easier time and some became quite friendly with the MPs. They were given jobs in the kitchen, the stores or in the vegetable garden.

A few of them were highly enterprising. I was astounded to discover that the coloured soldiers maintaining the vegetable garden, were actually growing their own dagga there!

Hawtrey and Wentzel were popular with the long-termers and spent much of their time assisting in the cookhouse.

One day, a black MP, Sergeant Ginja, leaned through the kitchen window and ordered Hawtrey to fetch him a glass of milk. Hawtrey who hated Ginja, mixed some white washing-powder with water and decanted it into a glass. After a long, thirsty swig Ginja realised his mistake and *gagged* violently.

The long-termers in the kitchen collapsed in a state of near hysteria and Ginja crept away, too shamed and embarrassed to take any action against Hawtrey.

Our time in DB came slowly to an end, and it was with feelings of elation that Hawtrey, Wentzel and I boarded the train at Bulawayo Station to return to Salisbury. (Since then, I've had a pathological hatred of Bulawayo Station).

For some reason of discipline we still had an escort, I really don't know why. But he was a good chap and he gave us some money to buy Cokes and chocolates – luxuries we had not tasted for a month.

On arrival in Salisbury, we were met by Wentzel's father, a kindly soul who treated us to a slap-up Wimpy breakfast before driving us back to the RLI barracks.

The troops and even the officers and NCOs were pleased to see us.

It was good to be back. The war hadn't stopped either.



CHAPTER 18

Grand Reef – September 1977

T

here was yet another callout.

Today I remember little about the actual flight, or even what our call-sign was. But I was in Lieutenant Thornton's stick and we were operating in a para role, working in conjunction with RAR para sticks. I was carrying the MAG.

How the K-car had managed to locate the DZ for us was amazing. Even more amazing was how the Dakota pilot had managed to drop us so accurately.

I crumpled to the ground and lay still for a few seconds, wondering if I had any broken bones.

Then the throbbing of the K-car snapped me back to reality, and I hurriedly unbuckled my harness.

After disentangling myself, I looked around. I was in a straggly meadow field and seemed to be absolutely alone.

Then I heard a voice softly exclaim, 'Fuck!'.

It was Trevor Schoultz.

He was a short distance away and somehow had managed to get some dirt lodged in his rifle barrel. I checked my own weapon and went over to him.

'Where are the other ouens?' I whispered.

He pointed to a ditch where Lieutenant Thornton and Chris Bernard were crouching. The lieutenant was talking into the radio.

'Did you have a good jump?' I enquired.

'Zut, I creamed in,' complained Schoultz. 'How can they let us jump in this fucking wind?'

'Mine wasn't so bloody good either.'

'Come on, Cocks, let's go,' he said abruptly

He was always playing on his rank, not because he was power crazy, but simply to irritate me. More often than not he succeeded,

‘Yes corpse,’ I replied sarcastically.

We moved to join our stick leader and found a black RAR sergeant and his stick were nearby.

We assembled quickly and, using silent signals, Lieutenant Thornton ordered Schoultz to lead the way, single file into thick bush about two hundred metres to the south.

He moved out and we automatically got into formation. I was behind Schoultz, and the lieutenant was behind me. Bernard was last, and behind him came the black sergeant and his RAR stick.

Schoultz was hard-pressed to find a path through the clinging jesse bush, and I instinctively clicked my safety catch to safe. DB was still too fresh in my mind to take chances.

Jesse bush has a habit of clawing and catching on to things – especially hook-shaped things like triggers – and it wouldn’t do to give Trev a burst up the arse, I thought to myself.

We had only progressed about a hundred metres when it happened.

Trevor Schoultz had started to cross a small clearing that I hadn’t reached, when the stillness of the bush around us exploded with gunfire.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion after that.

I saw Trevor drop into cover behind an anthill on the far side of the clearing, and begin to return fire.

For a second, I was bemused by the suddenness of the action, then I belatedly realised I was standing without cover in the very centre of the clearing.

And I was being shot at.

From where?

Dust and smoke about ten paces to my right supplied the answer.

I turned and crouched into a firing position and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Oh, Christ – a stoppage!

I nearly panicked.

Thoughts screamed through my brain. Trevor’s in trouble and I’m not even helping him.

It seemed like an eternity, until I realised the safety catch was still on.

I again squeezed the trigger and this time the rounds exploded from the barrel, and my confidence flooded back.

It gave me a tremendous feeling of powerful, vicious elation knowing it was my machinegun that was killing whoever was shooting at us... It also stemmed the terror inside me.

I emptied the whole belt in one long burst, willing the bullets to go faster. Then, exhausted of rounds, the belt fell out of the gun.

I dropped to my knees, pulled a hundred-round belt from my shoulder and reloaded.

The sound of the gunfire that roared in my ears caused a high pitched humming in my brain.

I re-cocked the MAG and was pleased my hand wasn't shaking.

Still bent double, I swung the gun on to my hip with my left arm straining, as it pulled the gun down to prevent it from firing high, I began firing again, this time in shorter bursts.

Suddenly I realised I was the only one shooting and I glanced to my left towards Trevor.

Oh, Jesus.

He was slumped over his rifle, his camouflage hat with the brim turned up cowboy-style, lying in the dirt.

Trev's head bobbed slowly, as if he were trying to stop himself from falling flat on his face.

There was a trickle of blood running down his scalp and onto his cheek bone. I registered.

'Schultz is hit,' I yelled to Lieutenant Thornton who was nearby, crouching behind a rock.

Without conscious realisation of what I was doing, I loaded a new fifty-round belt into the MAG and recommenced firing at the guerrillas. That they were already dead made no difference.

Thornton and Bernie Bernard had also arrived and they were firing too, even though they didn't know what had happened.

If in doubt – shoot.

Reality jolted me when the lieutenant spoke. Or was it reality?

'Chris, you and Bernie go and check out the gooks,' snapped Lieutenant Thornton.

Bernie was by my side in a flash, and I saw his eyes were wide, his mouth slightly agape. I think this was the contact that finally cracked him...

and I realised then, that one could do this sort of thing for only just so long.

But it was only towards the end of my own service that I understood the full implications of what ‘cracking up’ was all about.

We sneaked forward gingerly, waiting for the bullets.

But none came, and a moment later we found the mutilated bodies of the guerrillas behind a cluster of rocks. Virtually every segment of their clothing was soaked in blood.

Bernie nevertheless insisted on firing a few more rounds into the corpses, and I shouted at him, ‘What are you doing, man? Can’t you see they’re fucking dead?’

‘They shot Trevor...’

Bernie was numbed. He was stupid.

I dashed back to the lieutenant who was removing Trevor’s webbing. I had the medic’s pack and was the only medic in the stick. It was my job to attend to Trevor.

Lieutenant Thornton had rolled Trevor on to his back, using his webbing as a pillow.

‘Come on, Chris, let’s have the bandages.’ He seemed very much in control of himself.

I was shaking badly, but I somehow managed to fasten a first field-dressing around Trevor’s head which was bleeding profusely.

He was groaning softly and I gabbled away to him, trying to reassure myself more than anything else.

Just as long as Trevor knows I’m still here, I told myself,

‘Get a drip.’

‘Yessir.’

‘Do you think you can get it in?’

‘I don’t know but I’ll give it a try’

I fumbled in my medic’s pack for a drip and clumsily assembled it.

I never had a chance of finding a vein. Not only had Trevor’s veins collapsed, but I was shaking like a leaf,

I tried five times desperately to find a vein with the needle, but I couldn’t.

Blood was pouring from Schoultz’s head and even in my shocked state I knew the fluids had to be replaced quickly, or else he would die.

His brains were starting to seep out and I couldn’t stop the flow

‘It’s no good sir,’ I stated flatly. “We must get him to an LZ.’

‘Okay, I’ll call a chopper. But while I do, go on trying to find a vein.

‘Okay sir.’ But I knew it was hopeless.

I tried again, but to no avail. Then the lieutenant was at my side again.

‘Right, the chopper’s on its way. Let’s get him outa here.’

The RAR sergeant and his stick came forward to help. Two burly men lifted Trevor, and holding him between them, started towards the open ground.

I followed behind, trying to console Trevor who was mumbling incoherently. Occasional phrases were just audible.

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘It’s okay, Trev, you’re going to be okay’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘We’re going to get you a chopper. You’ll be fine.’

He lapsed into unconsciousness. But a few metres further on, he began mumbling again and when I held his hand, he responded with a vicelike grip that I felt was a desperate plea not to leave him.

I felt utterly helpless, and as I watched the grey matter of his brain oozing from his skull, I knew he was dying.

We finally got him to a suitable LZ.

‘Have another go with the drip, Chris’, suggested Lieutenant Thornton and I pulled out my last needle.

But I was still shaking violently, and once again I failed to find the elusive vein.

Lieutenant Thornton, realising it was hopeless, said nothing, and I cradled Trevor’s head in my lap, trying to shield him from the glaring sun, while we waited for the helicopter to come,

I had run out of first field-dressings and both Trevor and I were soaked with his blood. By now a large handful of his brains were protruding from the wound, and I covered his head with my body to protect it from the dust as the helicopter came in to land.

A tremendous feeling of relief surged through me when I saw it was Pete Leid, the Commando Medic, who leaped from the helicopter and stooped to help us put Trevor on to a stretcher.

After we had lifted him into the helicopter, I silently said my goodbyes.

I can recall only distantly that Lieutenant Thornton was speaking on the radio, as the realisation that the war was not going to stop – no matter

what – hit me like a sledgehammer. What did I think – a fucking time-out?

The lieutenant took us back to sweep through the area, and that put an end to my thoughts, which was good.

Without Trevor, the stick suddenly seemed small and insignificant. We were no longer a compact and cohesive fighting unit. Just three individuals.

When we reached the dismembered guerrillas, we went through the ritual of looting their corpses. As usual the flies had beaten us to it.

I rolled one of the bodies on to its back and went through the routine with hardly a thought... First the shirt pockets, then the trouser pockets – front and back – both pairs. It was common for the guerrillas to wear more than one pair at a time.

I found about forty dollars, the notes dirty and bloodied, and divided it into three shares.

‘What about Trev’s share?’ demanded Bernie.

‘What the fuck does he need it for?’ I answered, my grief emerging as sudden, uncalled for irritation.

I’ll take it to him in hospital.’

‘He’s probably dead already’ I said tightly.

‘Maybe, but I still want to give it to him.’ Bernie was becoming too emotional, but I yielded to his logic and recounted the money. As it was, Lieutenant Thornton had refused to accept his share, probably thinking it was beneath an officer’s dignity to accept loot.

The rest of that day passed like a dream for me.

I can hazily remember the journey back to base at Grand Reef, lying amidst the tousled parachutes on the back of the truck, in an effort to keep out the evening cold.

As the vehicle bumped its way along the road, I tried to shed a tear for Trevor.

But I found that I couldn’t. Something deep inside kept everything bottled up. I was stunned of course, but even now I am bewildered at my lack of grief. Maybe it was our training. Or perhaps grief simply can’t be switched on and off like a tap. Maybe my own survival came first.

At the base Sergeant Major Fraser was waiting. But he wasn’t ranting and screaming orders like he usually did. He was subdued when he spoke to me in the tent that I had shared with Schoultz.

Cocks, I want you to pack up Schoultz’s kit. You know where everything is.’

‘Sir.’

‘Well done on the kills by the way’

‘Sir.’

I immediately got down to packing up Schoultz’s kit. I didn’t need any memories when I woke up the next morning.

Soon the only thing left was an empty bed.

Amazingly Schoultz somehow survived. I think it was because of his own rugged will to live. Medically though, he owed his life to Pete Leid who managed to find a vein and pumped him with six drips in the helicopter whilst en route to Umtali Hospital.

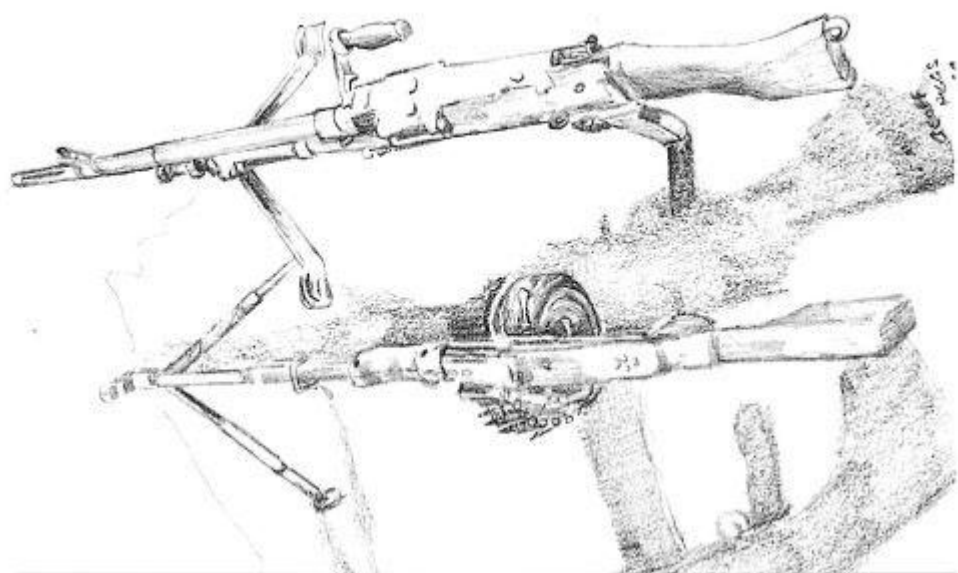
Pete told me the pilot had had to keep wiping Trev’s blood off the windscreen so he could see.

So Schoultz did not die. He recovered. If that’s what you can call it.

He is paralysed down his left side and has a steel plate in his head.

He has managed to get a menial, clerical job in Harare. But he may need to have his left arm amputated.

I don’t see him any more.



CHAPTER 19

Logistics

Dress

In the early part of 1976, the dress regulations for men on combat were relaxed to say the least, and the men wore a variety of clothing of their own choice.

The most popular attire in the bush was a green 3 Commando T-shirt (this was not standard issue, but sold to the troops by the CQ) or a standard combat camouflage shirt. T-shirts were the more popular of the two, and a wide variety of colours were permissible, including green, brown and even black. Long camouflage trousers were rarely worn. The men preferred the far more comfortable boxer shorts which also came in a variety of colours, the most common being the khaki issue.

Socks were hardly ever worn, and the men generally opted for the black PT takkies (tennis shoes). However track shoes were also common and some men wore standard combat boots or veldskoens, which were also very popular. In 1977 what were called ‘clandestine’ black takkies were introduced – ‘clandestine’ because they had no tread. But I found this counterproductive. Whenever I saw treadless footprints, I knew Security Forces were in the area, and as the enemy presumably would know also, I soon discarded my pair. Apart from being treadless, they also took a long time to put on and take off, and in wet weather were treacherous on slippery surfaces.

Headgear was where a soldier could really express his individuality. I’m sure at the time there were no two pieces of headgear the same. The standard issue combat cap (commonly known as a ‘cunt cap’) was of poor quality, and would be mutilated to suit the wearer’s requirements. The rear flap, there to protect the back of the neck from the sun, was immediately chopped off, as it proved a hindrance in thick bush. The protruding and

unwieldy brim was also whittled down in size, and the peak of the cap sometimes squashed flat in the front and tacked in place with a thread, thereby creating the effect of a cap not dissimilar to those used in the American Civil War. Floppy bush-hats of several hues also were worn, as were the olive green FRELIMO and guerrilla hats. In winter, folded-up balaclavas were particularly popular.

Although the Rhodesian uniforms were certainly excellent for camouflage purposes, the standard of manufacture was poor, and we envied the foreign troops in the commando whose issues of American, British or Australian clothing were all vastly superior.

Perhaps the most useful item of all the army issue was the face veil. This had a hundred different uses, and the only time I personally ever used it in its original role was to ward off pestering mopani flies while based in lowveld areas. The face veils were often neatly folded and used as a head scarf, which proved very effective as a sweat band, and I would often wear one. It was often used as a scarf in cold weather, and could also act as a handkerchief, a rag for cleaning weapons or cooking utensils or, rolled up, a fairly adequate pillow. Being of a mottled green colour, it was sometimes used as a camouflage drape. In fact, one soldier from 12 Troop (Alan Hein) wrapped his face veil around a tall, black top hat which was decorated with a yellow AA badge. He made a strange sight in battle, and reminded me of a demented Geronimo.

However the days of flamboyant individualism did not last long, for with the increase of hostilities in 1976, it became necessary to adopt a more professional attitude to our dress.

It soon became SOP to camouflage our rifles and equipment with standard-issue army camouflage paint. Black camouflage cream also became the order of the day, and this proved most effective when applied in streaks or splodges, rather than as a full cover. All that was required was to break up the outline and shine of the face, and consequently some of the men went to great lengths to daub themselves after the fashion of Red Indian braves. But, useful though it was, the cream was heartily detested by most of us. Any, and all exposed skin had to be daubed with this greasy cream, and it not only played havoc with our highly sensitive, teenage complexions, but also led to a phasing-out of the wearing of shorts. The amount of cream that had to be applied to one's bare legs not only was vast, but also proved exasperating to wash off.

With the advent of parachuting in early 1977 we were all issued with camouflage jump-suits. These were like boiler suits, and soon became very popular. The suits not only were of good quality lightweight material, but they had innumerable pockets on the chest and thighs that were extremely useful for storing maps and cigarettes. An added advantage was, that when wearing a jump-suit, the only areas requiring black cream were the face, neck and hands.

It was in 1978 that we took to wearing our green berets in combat. This was to let the enemy know that the RLI was around, and although we were supposed to blacken the silver badge, we refused to do so on the grounds that this would be desecrating battalion colours.

In barracks, dress discipline naturally was more rigid. Combat or khaki drill shirts, combat longs, combat boots, beret and stable belt were the order of the day, and any infringement would bring a host of charges upon the offender. At that time, only senior NCO's and officers were permitted to wear veldskoens, which were infinitely more comfortable than the cumbersome boots we troopies were forced to wear. However by 1978, all ranks were allowed to wear them, and although never standard issue, they became an integral and much appreciated part of battalion dress.

The most revered of all our uniforms was the ceremonial dress, the Number Ones. Officially known as 'Greens', this uniform was naturally worn with considerable pride. Our hearts swelled at the sight of a squad of 'Greens', their uniforms gleaming, white rifle slings shining and black stick boots pounding the asphalt in perfect unison.

Accoutrements

Perhaps the most important of a soldier's accoutrements was his webbing. If not adapted to perfectly fit a man's body, webbing could be very uncomfortable indeed, for it would chafe and rub into his hips and back. Unfortunately the standard issue was of shockingly poor quality, which frayed and wore very quickly. Even the standard belt would collapse under the weight of magazines and water bottles, and we therefore dispensed with our local webbing just as soon as better replacements could be found. Almost all of my own webbing was in fact of Communist origin, taken from dead guerrillas, and my belt and radio pouch which were East German, proved far harder than the local counterparts. The remainder of my webbing – water bottles and pouches, magazine pouches and kidney

pouches were Chinese... Even my black plastic camouflage-cream bottle was made in China.

The guerrillas generally wore chest webbing for the carriage of their magazines, and this type of webbing became very popular with our troops so much so that local firms began copying the idea. But I personally was not partial to chest webbing, as I found it made me sweat. It also was uncomfortable when in the prone position, as the magazines tended to dig into one's chest. I therefore wore all my webbing on my hips.

As I sometimes earned the MAG, I wore two large belt pouches on my hips as well. Each pouch could carry three belts of fifty rounds apiece, and I also wore two hundred-round belts draped over my shoulders. Loaded in the gun was a fifty-round belt, and as each rifleman also carried a spare belt, the gunner would have up to seven hundred rounds at his disposal. This provided, as it was designed to do, considerable fire power.

In the role of rifleman, I used the .MAG pouches to store FN magazines. On either side of the belt buckle were also a pair of double-magazine pouches, which were lightly fastened for ease of extraction during battle. Apart from bullets, a soldier carried a variety of grenades. Usually one HE grenade, one white phosphorus hand grenade, a smoke grenade, an Icarus rocket flare and one or two rifle grenades.

One rifleman in the stick carried the medic's pack, and every man carried a saline drip. The stick leader and the medic wore phials of morphine and sosegon around their necks, often attached to their dog tags. The stick leader also carried the A-63 radio (later the A-76), either in a radio-pack on his back or in a kidney pouch on his hips. The handset was tied onto the webbing straps at the shoulder, as near to his ear as possible, to facilitate using the radio without having to remove or hold the handset.

The stick leader was also responsible for the maps, radio codes, mini-binoculars and compass, and he carried too a pencil flare for short-range identification. For aerial identification, each man carried a square of brilliant-orange waterproof material called a dayglow.

Even though not laid down as SOP, each soldier carried a lightweight army sleeping-bag in a mat pack on his back. But while they were very comfortable to sleep in, I found them to be both bulky and noisy, for their semi-waterproof material rustled every time the occupant moved. I managed to overcome this problem by having a tailor make me up a sleeping-bag from a 'reject' parachute. It was as light as a feather, warm in

winter and cool in summer, and it fitted snugly into a small kidney pouch. For the rainy season I bought some lightweight canvas which I had made up as a cover for the sleeping bag, and I was heartily pleased to discover that the whole arrangement could defy even the most vicious of thunderstorms... There is no doubt that as they say, necessity is truly the mother of invention.

The rains were one of our worst enemies. Apart from the fact that the lush bush during the rainy months provided ideal cover for the guerrillas, the dampness resulted in rust that found its way into every nook and cranny of our weapons. This sapped the morale of the men, for it was only with considerable effort spent on incessantly cleaning and oiling our weapons, that we were able to maintain them in an efficiently usable condition.

Weaponry

The standard issue rifle was the 7.62 long-calibre Fabrique Nationale (or FN) of Belgian origin. Territorials and reservists in a few of the other units were issued with the British SLR, which was similar to the FN, and/or the less reliable G-3.

The FN normally took a twenty-round magazine, though a few of the men were lucky enough to lay their hands on some rare thirty-round magazines. I was highly gratified when one day I was lucky enough to 'discover' two of them hiding in the depths of the commando armoury.

The FN has two rates of fire, and can be used either as a repeating rifle or as a fully automatic weapon – though the latter was only rarely selected, as the ammunition was too rapidly expended. Also, because the FN is a very powerful weapon, on automatic it tends to buck upwards and is difficult to control.

A few officers and senior NCO's were issued with folding-butt FNs. These were few and far between and we looked at them enviously. Neat and portable, they were not only ideal for paratroopers, but very effective in thick bush when used as a sub-machinegun.

Some of the marksmen in the commando fitted their rifles with telescopic, single-point sights, which at long range were quite devastating. For night ambushes infra-red, telescopic sights were often used. But I was never a very good shottist and shunned these devices, rationalising my rejection that they added extra weight to my rifle. They were also very

cumbersome in heavy bushveld and anyway, for us most actions took place at very close range.

I vastly preferred the open-sight method of shooting, where one fired with both eyes open and used the rifle as an extension of the arm as if pointing. It took a lot of practice, but eventually I attained proficiency and the motions became instinctive.

Popular with most troops were the specially designed flash-hiders that fitted over the muzzle, thereby adding weight which reduced lift of the rifle when on automatic fire. Most of the Americans in the commando liked using rapid fire, and had these eliminators fitted. But here again, I shunned the device as I found it disturbed the balance of my weapon in open-sighted shooting.

A good gunner was naturally always in demand, and the stick leaders went to all sorts of lengths to ensure they got the gunner they wanted.

The troop support weapon was the 762 calibre MAG machinegun, also manufactured by Fabrique Nationale of Belgium. It was very heavy, and both awkward and clumsy to carry, but this did not seem to deter the gunners. They all took immense pride in their weapons so much so, in fact, that they were nearly all christened with the names of girlfriends and fiancées lovingly painted on the stocks, (I remember Joe Prinsloo's gun was called 'Maggy').

The MAG was carried on a leather sling and often fired from the hip. But in protracted combat or in ambush, its gunner would lie prone behind it, with the stock nestled into his shoulder, his right forefinger on the trigger, and left hand gripping the top of the stock to steady the weapon. In this position with the bipods down, the MAG was deadly accurate and far superior to the lighter machineguns used by the guerrillas.

Only operative on fully automatic, it was difficult to squeeze off single rounds from the MAG. Nevertheless the more experienced gunners could do it with the gentlest flick of their forefinger on the trigger. In a commando-support role it could be fitted on tripods, but generally these were only used in defensive roles or on fixed firing lines.

Whichever method was used, every gun was unique. The pitch of each gun varied, as did its rate of fire. Like a Morse-code operator, every gunner beat out his own individual tattoo or rhythm of fire, and we came to recognise who was on a particular gun just from the sound of firing.

Pistols and revolvers were optional, and all paratroopers were entitled to draw 9mm FN or Star Parabellum pistols. Private handguns were permitted too, and I was fortunate enough to capture a 32 Walther pistol in Moçambique, that I somewhat illegally claimed as my own. Although it so happened that I never had to use it, it was lighter and more compact than the issue pistols and I wore it all the time... But handguns were really only an insurance policy, to be used in the most desperate of situations. However, in cave-clearing operations, handguns were used with more frequency, being more manoeuvrable.

The guerrillas' lower cadres were not always well armed and at times carried only outdated Simonev SKS repeating rifles and a few clips of ammunition. Most of their cadres carried grenades however, with the famous stick grenade being the commonest.

The most widely used of the communist handguns was the very reliable Tokarev pistol. It was usually only carried by high-ranking guerrilla officers, and regarded as a valuable prize indeed for the Rhodesian troops.

The Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle and its many variations, was the hardy mainstay of the enemy guerrilla forces. Being of intermediate 762 calibre, it was much lighter, smaller and less accurate than its powerful counterpart, the FN. Nevertheless it required less maintenance, was easier to operate, and at close quarters was a formidable adversary. The AK-47 had a high-pitched crack that was distinctively different from the resonant boom of the FN. It was manufactured in a host of communist countries with the non-metallic parts made from a variety of materials, usually bakélite or wood, and perhaps that had something to do with it.

The AKM was a modernised version of the original AK-47 that boasted an excellent, serrated bayonet, complete with wire cutters, and like the light machineguns, was carried only by senior guerrilla commanders. Although the guerrillas used a wide variety of machineguns, all lighter and with less hitting power than our MAG, of them all, the RPD and the RPK were the most widely used and certainly the most effective.

A few heavy 12.7 and 14.5 anti-aircraft guns were brought into the country by the guerrillas, but these generally were cached and rarely saw action inside Rhodesia. They were the standard defence weapons in the guerrilla encampments in Moçambique and Zambia, and used in an anti-personnel role were both lethal and terrifying in the extreme.

Of all the guerrilla weapons, the RPG-2 and the RPG-7 rocket-launchers were probably the ones most feared. Light, versatile and manoeuvrable, these weapons caused many a falter in an advance, and were truly awesome used in an anti-personnel role.

Surface-to-air Strella or SAM 7 missiles were a stock guerrilla anti-aircraft defence weapon that were used primarily in the external camps. But a few saw action inside the country with devastating, sometimes tragic effect. Because of its comparative slowness, the helicopter naturally was the commonest victim, but Viscounts and Dakotas and other smaller aircraft were also shot down.

On both sides artillery saw a modicum of action, usually only in defensive roles. On occasion twenty-five pounders from the Artillery Regiment were called in, either to soften up a target in cross-border raids or to cover a withdrawal.

Apart from a regiment of armoured cars, the Rhodesian forces could muster very little in the way of mechanised forces. But ZANLA forces in particular, and ZIPRA to a lesser extent, quite often deployed Soviet T-34 tanks in external battles. Although they were outdated and sluggish, they nevertheless provided considerable punch to the array of guerrilla weaponry.

Rations

In many armies, food is a highly contentious matter, but I am able to state unequivocally that our rations were generally of a high standard. In barracks particularly, the fresh food provided by the caterers was very good indeed.

Breakfast for instance, consisted of cereal or porridge followed by bacon, sausages, eggs and toast. Tea and coffee were both available, though for some reason, always with a suspicious taint of copper. Lunch, the main meal of the day, usually started with soup, and was followed by a meat or fish dish and rounded off with a pudding. Suppers, which were not as substantial, consisted of a light meal of mince or pies. On special days, the cooks would outdo themselves and present us with a delicious feast. Christmas was of course one such occasion, and the whole affair was enhanced by the officers serving as waiters to the troops.

In the operational areas the cooking was done by battalion caterers as well as cooks from the Service Corps. These were regular soldiers, often

seconded to a commando for many months at a time, and some trepidation was felt whenever a new cook arrived. We would taste the new fare warily, and justified complaints were welcomed by the officers. The poor cooks would then suffer the rage of the CSM or the CQ.

Not having barrack facilities in the bush areas, naturally the food was not as good. But it still was adequate and reasonably palatable.

When on patrol, we were issued with standard army ration packs or 'rat packs'. There were several varieties of these packs, each containing a different selection of canned food. The favourites were the 'C' and 'D' packs, which contained amongst others items, tinned pilchards, and bully beef. Corned ham, frankfurters and fish were all popular. The ration in each pack was designed to feed one man for one day, but in reality could be stretched to last for two days if necessary. Every pack contained a packet of rice, peanuts, a tube of butter, a tube of jam, salt, sweets, glucose tablets, curry powder, chutney and a packet of 'dog' biscuits that were delicious if soaked in water overnight, then fried in butter.

Among the troops the most detested of all rat pack items was the can of beans and franks. The beans themselves were perfectly acceptable, but for some reason the manufacturers insisted on hiding in the middle of them, a highly objectionable hard-boiled egg. Almost inedible and grossly offensive, the egg was as tough as old leather and not nearly as tasty. The white had gone a mouldy blue, the yolk a purulent black... and it is a matter of record that one day a trooper drove one of these 'eggs' down an airstrip with a golf club and the 'missile' landed intact.

To add interest to what could be rather a bland meal, I supplemented my rations with onions and garlic (excellent as a mosquito and mopani fly repellent) plus Bovril or biltong. With these added extras and with the tea and coffee bags, powdered milk, sugar and powdered orangeade that also were provided, I was able to concoct for myself some very passable meals on my little gas cooker.

Our diets were often regulated by the availability of water, and this sometimes was difficult to find during the dry winter months. Rice uses a lot of water and we had to forego this staple food when water was scarce. The number of tea brews were also drastically reduced at such times. In fact water, or rather the lack of it, could pose more than just aggravating problems, and as a new trooper I learnt a harsh lesson when during the summer I exhausted all my water bottles during a six-day ambush after only

three days. One was regarded as the lowest of the low if one begged water, so for the next three days I went without. It was a horrific experience, only worsened by eating, and the blistering heat and scant shade turned my situation into a living hell.

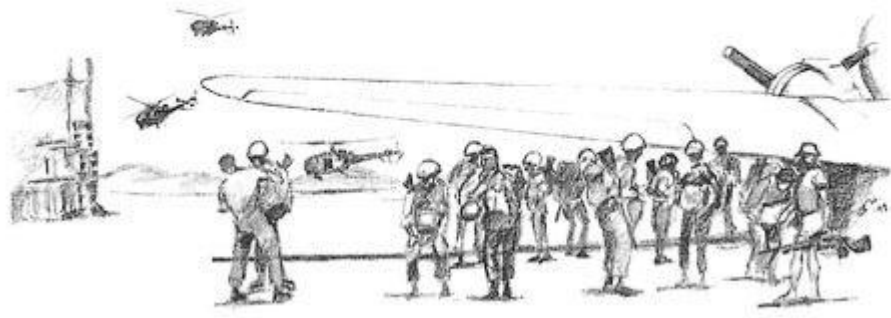
Of all the different areas of Rhodesia, Gona-Re-Zhou and the south-eastern lowveld are notorious for the lack of water, and I remember when on a certain patrol, we were forced to resort to drinking from filthy, muddy puddles, polluted with cattle waste. Needless to say our stomachs rebelled, and very soon we all endured agonising cramps.

After these episodes I adhered strictly to a rigid water discipline, and although I might have had only a few sips a day, I never again ran out of water.

The situation was probably worse for the guerrillas. In uninhabited areas they could not benefit from local knowledge, and certainly they had no chance as we did, of being resupplied.

When on long reconnaissance patrols, we were kept supplied by helicopters which brought us resupplies of rations, fresh water and even our mail. However this usually only happened when we were operating externally.

As a footnote to this water 'saga', I should add that we were all very fond of our tea brews, and having a lot of Englishmen in the commando, were continually stopping to brew up. We all looked forward to these breaks with relish, and within five minutes of stopping we'd be drinking fresh, hot tea ... I should perhaps record that I always kept a hip-flask of brandy in my pack, and a tot in my evening coffee often lulled my weary body into a temporary semblance of a state of wellbeing.



CHAPTER 20

Raid on Chimoio – Spring 1977

T

he Rhodesian raid against the ZANLA camp in Chimoio, Moçambique in the November of 1977 was a milestone in the war.

Apart from previous smaller raids, such as the Rambanayi operation and the Selous Scouts' attack on Nyadzonya, this was the first time that the Rhodesian Military Command had openly flaunted world opinion. A new phrase emerged in the military vocabulary – 'a pre-emptive strike'.

The objective was to destroy the external guerrilla infrastructure as well as guerrilla personnel on the ground. It was something the RLI and SAS had wanted to do for a long time. Although in retrospect and from a military perspective the raid was a year too late to alter the course of the war, it led the way for subsequent cross-border operations into Moçambique, Zambia and as far afield as Angola and Tanzania.

I was on leave at the time, unaware that an operation was in the offing, so I cannot comment on the slaughter that took place. But it was formidable. Over 1200 guerrillas were killed... ZANLA claimed Chimoio was a refugee camp and the Rhodesians claimed otherwise.

When I returned from my leave, I heard the stories from Norris, Condon and Abbott. The Air Force fighter-bombers had swooped in over the busy parade ground, and like skittles, the guerrillas fell in their hundreds. Many were unarmed cadres and many were seasoned veterans.

Then, still applying the fireforce concept, the ground troops of the RLI and the SAS swept in. The one story that sticks in my mind is of Griffio sitting atop a pile of corpses, calmly eating a tin of bully beef.

John Connelly was also there. Seventeen years later he was to relate to me two incidents which had tonnented him for all that time. It was uncanny that he told me the stories two days before he was killed in a motorcycle accident. The first incident occurred when his stick was sweeping towards a

log pile. A female guerrilla suddenly stood up from behind a log, her arms raised above her head.

‘Surrender, surrender,’ she begged, hysterically.

John told me he was never to forget those words – and her look of howling terror – as he shot her through the face.

This incident pales into insignificance as compared to what happened a few hours later. The stick had arrived at what appeared to be an ablution area. To the front was a crude, brick building in which were housed a series of latrines. An enclosed passage ran down the length of the latrines, and at the end was a wooden door. The door was closed, and so it was a fair guess that people were hiding in the passageway and possibly in the latrines. It would have been folly to open the door, so John from a range of about ten paces, crouched over his MAG and emptied belt after belt into the wooden door. He had tears in his eyes seventeen years later when he described the ensuing carnage.

There were people in that building, but they were women and children. They came tumbling out of the building – the living and the dead – wailing crying and screaming for mercy. The area around the doorway was a mass of heaving, bloodied, dismembered humanity. But still the tide of bodies stumbled blindly towards the gun – apparently believing their only salvation was to engulf the maniacal gunner with supplication. A few desperate and wounded survivors – some of the mothers – managed to drag themselves to John and clung imploringly around his legs. But their pleas for mercy went unheeded as John shot them down at his feet.

‘I’ve had to live with this for seventeen years,’ John told me. The dull emptiness said it all.

In my heart I cried for those women and children... and for John.

But above all, the Chimoio raid exemplified the high degree of cohesion and cooperation amongst the Air-Force and the Army. It also highlighted the importance of surprise.

However, rarely again would the Rhodesian forces strike with such impunity. The guerrillas’ intelligence network, itself of the highest order, was ably assisted by sympathetic personnel who had apparently infiltrated the top levels of the Rhodesian Military Command.

I remember after the war was over, speaking to a man from the American Embassy. He claimed the Americans knew our every move, as did the British and presumably the Russians. Their satellites could pick up

any abnormal troop buildups... I think I believe him. We could not win – any which way.

I have taken the liberty of including in the appendices a facsimile of the actual Rhodesian Op order for the raid on Chimoio. I feel it adequately shows the high degree of the planning and professionalism of the Air Force, the RLI and the SAS.

Over 1200 guerrillas were killed that day, along with uncounted women and children. But the war did not stop.

It merely intensified.

Apart from the larger, more ‘glamorous’ raids, we did several smaller sorties into Moçambique – generally in the rugged and mountainous border areas across from Cashel and Inyanga. In many cases these raids were conducted by the local commando fireforce in the area at the time – with Canberra and Hunter air strikes over and above the standard Alouette and Lynx support. These raids generally yielded low enemy casualties – in most cases a few FRELIMO cadres who had not been fortunate enough to flee. ZANLA had quickly learnt the folly of positioning its camps too close to the border.

At a junior level, (it was never officially disclosed to us) we suspected the purpose of these raids was to create a *cordon sanitaire* of no-man’s land – and to instil terror into the Moçambicans. Our scorched-earth policy did not belie this thinking, as we torched and destroyed kraal after kraal. Inevitably civilian casualties were high. After the hype and adrenaline rush of an initial attack, we had to kill something -goats, donkeys, people. Somehow atrocities seemed more ‘acceptable’ in a foreign country. Certainly there was less accountability.

Our main enemy in these ‘day-trip’ raids was the innocuous buffalo bean. Moçambique’s humid climate and fertile soils provided ideal growing conditions for these evil little beans. About the size of a small haricot, this little brown bean was covered with a mass of minuscule hairs, each hair barely visible to the naked eye. Growing on creepers and vines, the beans would entangle themselves into any and all types of foliage. Exceedingly well camouflaged, many an unwitting soldier stumbled into a nest of buffalo beans.

Once the hairs had come into contact with exposed skin, the torture would start for the victim. Scratching only exacerbated the condition as this merely transferred the hairs to another part of the body. Within a few

minutes, irritating discomfort would turn into excruciating agony. Anti-histamine cream and mud were the only effective antidotes. Sometimes though, it would take more than half a dozen tubes of Calamine Cream to control an attack.

I remember on one particular raid in August 1977 the entire sweep line was forced to halt to attend to the victims. Two of the men in my stick were so desperately incapacitated that I was forced to call in a helicopter casevac. (Up until that stage of the war, it was generally felt that buffalo bean victims did not warrant casevac.) I had learned my lesson early on in 1976 when operating in the Chesa area near Mount Darwin. As an inexperienced rookie I'd stumbled into a nest. My one tube of Calamine Cream was gone in seconds and I'd drawn blood from the scratching. I had wanted to scream in pain.



CHAPTER 21

Grand Reef – Summer 1977

T

he summer of 1977 proved a heady time for the commando. We were full of confidence and our firepower kill rate continued to climb steadily. At the same time our casualty rate was relatively low, and although we suffered a lot of wounded, the number killed in action was ‘acceptable’.

Most of our time was spent operating out of Grand Reef into the Maranke and Zimunya Tribal Trust Lands.

Grand Reef was our favourite posting. It was a four-hour drive to Salisbury, and only a few miles from Umtali, a scenic town nestling amongst the hills that straddled the Mozambican border.

And there were girls in Umtali. Notably, the trio we had christened ‘Gums’, ‘Jaws’ and ‘Great White’. The latter had a serious fixation for Charlie Warren and he would go to extreme lengths to steer clear of her. I was quite attracted to ‘Gums’ (she was quite pretty) and once or twice had a couple of ‘deep, meaningful’ conversations with her. It was purely platonic – mainly on my part – as her reputation for ‘sharing it about’ was common knowledge to all the commandos.

During those times we were often allowed night passes to visit the high spots of the town.

The RLI had, unfortunately but deservedly, a reputation for bad behaviour and fights were frequent. We fought with everyone – with civilians, with other units, and on occasions even with aggressive ‘ladies’!

One night we were on a pass and decided to attend a dance at the Queen’s Hall in Umtali. Although a band was playing, the majority of us were fast getting drunk. A few of the lads were still vainly searching for available women, but most of us were resigned to the fact that the chances were slim, and it was both easier and cheaper to get drunk. The band consisted of coloureds, and they were good.

During a break Charlie Norris asked if they would allow the 3 Commando 'band' to fill in during the interval. They agreed, albeit reluctantly, and the four of us strutted confidently up onto the stage.

Marsh, the commando signaller, took the drumsticks, sat on the stool and confidently spun them in the air *à la* Buddy Rich. Although a competent drummer, he was a little too drunk to perform and the sticks clattered noisily to the floor.

The coloured drummer gave him a disapproving look. Pilbeam took the bass guitar, and Charlie and I grabbed hold of the rhythm and lead guitars respectively.

I was slightly apprehensive... Far from being a 'bona fide' band, we'd never played together before and Charlie had only been playing the guitar for a few weeks.

'Come on, Chris, let's hit 'em with "The Saints",' he said.

'Okay Charlie, let's whack it in C,' I agreed.

Charlie turned to Pilbeam who was confidently plucking away like Paul McCartney on the bass, and shouted, ' "The Saints" in C!'

The coloureds in the crowd had begun to get restless.

'What are we playing?' shouted Marsh through the middle of a very impressive drum roll. 'The Saints,' I yelled, 'now fucking shut up and wait for the intro.'

'No problem.' With a disarming smile Marsh tried another defiant drum roll but in the process dropped the sticks again.

Finally the band was pronounced as ready and I led them off.

Down in the crowd I noticed Simpson and Condon cheering wildly. But the audience apart from the RLI was not receptive and the coloureds were now getting distinctly abusive. The number finished impressively with a five-minute drum roll from Marsh, which he hashed up by falling off his stool.

We didn't know which song to play next.

'I know', I suggested, 'what about "Don't Let Me Cross Over"?' This was an old Jim Reeves number fondly adapted for the RLI, 'Good idea,' said Pilbeam and convulsed into a Jimi Hendrix pose.

*Don't let me cross over the Moçambique border,
It belongs to FRELIMO, it will never be ours.*

*Well I don't mind dying for a Rhodesian cause,
But I don't wanna die in no fucking Pork wars.*

*Well the choppers are lifting, we're leaving today.
I'm left quite astounded, there's nothing to say.
The orders have come through, our land falls behind
Oh, what has become of fucking mankind?*

The song was going reasonably well until Charlie, who didn't know the chords approached me, guitar slung, to see what my fingers were doing. In the process he was stretching the coiled lead from the amplifier to the guitar almost straight. As I turned to show him the fretboard, Charlie finally yanked the tautened lead clean out of its jack plug. This seemed to outrage the coloureds and suddenly a barrage of bottles and glasses came hurtling in our direction.

'Fuck this,' Pilbeam pronounced, 'this is worse than fireforce.'

He dropped the bass guitar and ran off the stage in a firm demonstration of discretion being the better part of valour.

The 3 Commando lads however, were enraged at the treatment 'their band' had received at the hands of the coloureds. A mass brawl ensued.

Simpson, Condon and Marsh cornered a tall, wiry coloured soldier in the entrance hall next to the manager's office and set out to administer their own idea of instant justice.

Unfortunately their adversary was 'King Rat', a hardened street fighter who had spent more time in DB than out of it. He was sharp and mean, with lightning-fast punches that were quite lethal. It took him less than a minute to floor all three of his assailants.

Simpson, never a man to admit defeat, dragged himself up and rushed to the manager's office where our weapons were stacked. Brushing aside the wildly protesting manager, he scooped up his MAG and brandishing it madly, stormed back into the hall and aimed it at King Rat's chest. 'Right, you motherfucker, if you're not outa here in ten seconds I'm gonna blow you away-ah!'

He cocked the weapon to add emphasis to his threat, and King Rat needed no further urging, and fled the hall.

Simpson then swivelled his gun on to the crowd and screamed, 'You heard me! Get outa here, or I'm gonna blow y'all away-ah!' He crouched down menacingly and assumed the firing position.

It took less than half a minute for over two hundred people to flee the hall and we stayed behind and jubilantly finished off their deserted drinks, revelling in the euphoria of our own power.

Simpson, Condon and Marsh were even more delighted with their victory than the rest of us. So much so that they refused to take the commando transport back to Grand Reef.

'We've got to get back in the camp by midnight.'

'Fuck that, we're gonna get pissed.' Weapons slung, they staggered from the hall to look for the nearest pub.

We left them to it and scrambled drunkenly aboard the transports to get back to Grand Reef. So did 'Gums' – she wanted a lift home and asked Corporal Hughes (who was driving our truck) if he wouldn't mind dropping her off on our way home. 'Gums' happened to sit herself next to Fergus O'Brien and his crate of beers near the back of the truck and very soon the pair of them were involved in a heated argument. It seemed that 'Gums' had asked Fergus for one of his beers and Fergus, not normally given to unnecessary social graces, told her to fuck off. Coupled with Fergus' frenzied laughter, this infuriated the spirited 'Gums' who promptly picked up a bottle of beer and cracked it over Fergus' head. That mad gleam came into Fergus' eyes as he shook his head once or twice to make sure it was still in one piece. He then grappled the squealing vixen and started to vigorously manhandle her breasts, laughing maniacally all the while.

Fortunately for 'Gums', Grant Hughes had managed to find her house and as the truck pulled up outside, Fergus hurled her bodily from the back of the truck (which was still not totally stationary). The luckless wench fell in a heap onto the road, her frock around her head, wailing and cussing like a banshee. Her father appeared at the front door, squinting into the porch light as the bedraggled 'Gums' stumbled to him. She stood in his lee and cursed us foully like a fishwife as Corporal Hughes pulled away. Fergus was cackling all the way back to Grand Reef.

By 0400hrs. Simpson, Condon and Marsh had had enough and began hitchhiking back to Grand Reef. Unluckily for them the first vehicle they thumbed down was a Land-Rover driven by Lieutenant Thornton, with a number of other 3 Commando officers aboard.

The next day after the manager's complaints reached camp the three delinquents were hauled up and charged. We were all taking bets they were off to DB for a minimum of twenty-eight days. But they were lucky and got off with only extra guard duties.

Goss Condon was shortly again to be the centre of controversy. His stick was posted to guard Leopard Rock Hotel in the Vumba Mountains just south of Umtali. The posting was for a week. The reason Goss had been chosen was that he was still on light duties because of his broken foot. True to form Goss and his men (also 'sick, lame and lazy') didn't bother to set pickets – let alone draw up a guard roster – and immediately retired to the bar for the week. Apart from occasional sorties to peep into guests' bedrooms through partially-drawn curtains, the men were firmly ensconced in the pub.

One evening a middle-aged couple arrived with their nubile young daughter in tow. This was indeed a momentous occasion for both the hotel and Goss and his men, as the hotel was near deserted of guests due to guerrilla activity in the area. Goss and his men obviously zeroed in on the couple's daughter in the bar that night but were successfully fended off by her parents. At closing time the parents went to bed, ensuring that their daughter followed suit.

Undaunted, Goss managed to prise the girl's name and room number out of the concierge and tip-toed clumsily down the passageway to the room. On arrival, he gently turned the door handle and was pleasantly surprised to discover it was not locked. His only error was that he had inadvertently entered the parents' room. The room was in total darkness as Goss fumbled his way towards the bed and sidled down onto the floor. His hand groped under the bed clothes and soon found the mother's thigh. The thigh stiffened as the mother awoke and realised a third person was in the room.

'John, John,' she whispered, shaking her husband. 'There's someone in the room.' The alarm in her voice soon startled John who switched on the bedside light. He peered over the edge of the bed to discover a semi-comatose soldier still attempting to fondle his wife's legs.

I'd better go and call security,' he whispered uncertainly.

'But, he IS security,' the wife hissed back 'And at any rate, you can't leave me in here with this lunatic. Maybe I should go and call the manager

and you stay here.'

'You can't leave me in here alone.' John was very nervous. 'He might go crazy when he notices you're gone.'

'We'll, maybe we should both go. I'll count to three and we'll make a dash for it.'

'Okay'.

'One, two, three.....' and the terrified couple fled the room in a flurry of linen.

Goss in the meantime was now fully awake, but feigning sleep. He had realised the seriousness of his position and no sooner had the couple darted out, than he too made a run for it back to his billet and safety. The following morning Goss and his men were summoned by the manager to appear on an identity parade. The woman immediately picked out Goss as the culprit and the stick was promptly sent back to Grand Reef in disgrace. The major went through the motions of outraged indignation and Goss was awarded a few extra guard duties.



CHAPTER 22

Lance Corporal – October 1977

P

ete Garnett was one of my closest friends.

We had spent many happy hours during our R and Rs, relaxing and drinking beer next to my parents' swimming pool. But he was something of a loner, and mostly preferred the solitude of his tiny room in the commando block to the comfort of his parents' home,

Pete was an excellent stick leader and an accomplished tracker, and he had been honoured for bravery.

Then he made a mistake that was to cost him his life.

Fireforce had been involved in a contact in the Mtoko area. The contact was drawing to a close and the ground troops were awaiting uplift by helicopter, eager to return to base, for we were going on R and R the next day.

Pete however, restless as usual, was wandering around the perimeter of the LZ, his eyes on the ground as he searched for guerrilla tracks that might have been missed.

He often wandered a hundred metres or so away from the rest of his stick like this, but we knew him as a competent soldier who could take care of himself. We also knew he preferred to be alone at such times, and we usually obliged him.

But on that fateful day he had the misfortune to stumble on a guerrilla who was lying hidden behind a bush.

The guerrilla fired a burst at Pete and one of the rounds severed the femoral artery in Pete's groin. Pete fell to the ground immediately, but the guerrilla continued firing. I suppose he knew he was cornered and had no option but to fight it out.

The major orbiting in the K-car above the scene, said later that Pete had managed to speak to him over the radio before he died.

His last words were, 'Three Nine, Three Nine... this is Sunray Stop 2. I have been hit... Repeat, I have been hit... I think I'm dying.'

It took less than a minute for poor Pete to bleed to death.

Colour Sergeant Coleman, ex-Special Forces from Vietnam, had recently joined the commando and was serving in Pete's stick.

He was very brave as he dashed across the small clearing in an attempt to rescue the prostrate lance corporal.

But after a brief and bitter exchange of fire, Colour Sergeant Coleman was grievously wounded.

The guerrilla was eventually killed by the others, but the cost had been high... Pete was dead and it would be many months before Colour Sergeant Coleman returned to the troop.

The next day we returned to Salisbury for our R and R feeling unexpectedly sober, and I felt I should break the sad news to my mother first, before she heard it announced on the radio and TV

'Pete Garnett was killed yesterday' I told her. There was no easy way to say it.

She looked at me in disbelief for a moment. Then realisation struck her, and she burst into tears, clinging to me.

I think she was crying as much in relief because I was still alive as she was for Pete's death.

I had volunteered for the difficult task of delivering Pete's personal possessions to his parents. They had been expecting me. When they asked me in, I deposited the lonely duffle bag on the carpet in the sitting room.

Mr Garnett, his eyes misted with tears, offered me a beer and I accepted.

The conversation naturally was sad, but it was not strained, and I was glad of that.

Pete's little sisters emptied the contents of his duffle bag on the carpet, and inspected each article in turn. His beret, his stable belt, his pay book, and all the other personal accoutrements of a soldier.

They were too young to understand.

Mr Garnett pleaded with me to come back and visit them one day, and I said I would.

For some reason I never have been back.

One day I will. I have promised myself that.

I had completed nearly two years in the army when I was promoted to lance corporal. I was made up at the same time as Condon and Fletcher, after doing a lance corporal's course, held a few months before at Training Troop.

Sarge Abbott had leaked to us that our reports had said we were irresponsible and unfit for leadership.

It seemed that Major Snelgar thought differently however, and one day in October 1977 we were summoned to the Officers' Mess.

'I have the results of the course you've all been on,' said the major. 'Doesn't make for very happy reading, does it?'

Fletcher stifled a nervous titter and Condon and I looked suitably sheepish.

'I don't send men on courses for fun you know' the major remonstrated sternly.

I noticed Sarge Abbott and Colour Sergeant Coleman were lurking somehow smugly in the background and wondered if they knew something we didn't.

'However, against my better judgement, I have decided to give each of you a stripe,' the major continued. 'In spite of these reports, which I disagree with, mind you, I consider you experienced and competent stick leaders. I don't believe you'll let me down.'

He shook hands with each of us in turn.

Abbott and Coleman also came over and shook hands.

"Well done guys," congratulated Colour Sergeant Coleman, 'you'll do ok.

I had a sneaking suspicion the senior NCOs had been pressurising the major to promote us... Well, at least *someone* believed in us.

We saluted and walked out.

We had been given two hours to get the stripes sewn on our uniforms, and we felt proud enough to burst.

Corporal Pudding called us over later to the tent that served as the Corporals' Mess at Grand Reef, and we discovered we would have to contribute a monthly subscription which went towards luxuries not available to the troopers.

This is really living in style, I thought, as I surveyed the dining table for the first time.

There was a tablecloth and china cups and plates... not like the metal dixies and mugs used by the troopers. There was also an impressive array of jams and sauces, as well as wonders of wonders some table napkins.

When we took our places somewhat self-consciously for the first time at the table Griffio, the Aussie, was engaged in a heated debate with Bob Smith.

They were discussing military history, a subject on which Bob Smith was an authority. Griffio, nevertheless, liked to bait him.

‘You fuckin’ Pommies don’t know what wars are,’ he antagonised. You’re always getting fuckin’ beaten.’

‘Bullshit,’ blustered Bob. ‘Name me one, you imbecilic convict.’

‘What about the American War of Independence?’

‘Aah, Griffio,’ Bob sighed condescendingly, ‘that was just a slight setback. Who marched south from Canada and burned the White House in 1812? Who laid waste the countryside and devastated those snivelling colonial peasants?’

Yeah maybe, but you still lost the one in 1776.’

Griffio now pretended to be bored with the whole conversation, but Bob wouldn’t let up.

‘Those stupid Yanks can’t even organise a piss-up in a brewery’

‘Oh, yeah?’ Hugh McCall looked up from cleaning his Luger. He always seemed to be cleaning his Luger. Now he took umbrage at this unwarranted attack on his country.

‘How come us stupid Yanks are always pulling you Poms outa the shit? Goddamn Poms, get bogged down in two world wars and have to come cryin’ to us to help ‘em outa the mess they got ‘emselves in!’

Condon, Fletcher and I listened closely, riveted by this intellectual stuff.

Bob Smith was determined to insult everyone.

‘McCall, don’t even talk to me about wars. You fucking wallies can’t even sort out a little guerrilla insurgency like Vietnam. You should have come to us – we would have shown you how we cleaned up Malaya.’

Pudding was supportive. Yeah, an’ now it’s us Poms who have to come and sort out these dumb Rhodies.’

Percy Hodgson, for the Rhodesians, didn’t even bother to look up from his comic. ‘Fuck off, you fat Pommy cunt.’ He’d obviously been involved in these arguments before.

Hugh McCall was sympathetic to Percy. You've got the right idea, Percy' he said, 'Having an argument with a Pommy is like having a battle of wits with an unarmed man.'

This amazing statement floored everyone for a while and the argument petered out.

Then Bob began to pour himself a cup of tea, and this immediately sparked off another argument. This time it was the British against the Americans in a heated discussion on the special merits of tea versus coffee.

I found meal times in the mess highly stimulating and always looked forward to the verbal exchanges. They would argue spiritedly over everything and anything -the Americans fighting the British, the English fighting the Scots and the Australians, the Rhodesians fighting the South Africans, and everyone ganging up and having a go at the Rhodesians.

The Rhodesian side was strengthened considerably by the arrival of Condon, Fletcher and myself, and Condon in particular proved himself a vociferous and worthy advocate of our cause.

Extracts from a letter written to my girlfriend – October 1977.

... This place is relatively quiet at the moment and there have been only a few scenes since we got back. Yesterday my stick parachuted in and it was very windy. We all had bad landings. My machinegunner hurt his back badly and somehow managed to break his gun. I ended up with a broken radio and pulled the ligaments in my foot. So my stick wasn't very useful... I was told the total cost of the contact was over a quarter of a million dollars. There were Canberras and all sorts of other jets flying around. The total kills amounted to a few civilians and one gook. Can you believe it? Since then I have been despatching. A sore foot does have its advantages, as I also get out of running which is such a barbarous activity... I spent all day today at the JOC swimming pool and I am very beetrootish at the moment. Mtoko hasn't changed at all. It is still as hot as ever, though I do feel the number of flies has trebled. I'm sure they have called in reinforcements.

We had the official opening of our pub last night and I am afraid that once again I succumbed to the dreaded brandy and got drunk. At the moment I must have what is the world's worst hangover.

All the blokes in 11 Troop say I have to buy them a crate of beer to celebrate our engagement. The rats – they'll look for any excuse for a party

and free drinks!... One of the lads got drunk last night and cooked frogs on the fire and ate them. Said he preferred them medium-rare. Can you believe it?.. The big news is that I am now lance corporal – wow!... Being a lance corporal makes life so much easier. We have our own mess tent and batmen to serve us food on china plates. We don't do guard duty, only radio watch, and we don't have weapons' inspection – we take the inspection! The rats here say I have to buy another crate of beers for being promoted. Hell, I lost enough beers last night playing darts...

I was nominated to go on an Assistant Despatcher's course at New Sarum. It seemed that the Air Force did not have enough assistant despatchers of its own to keep up with fireforce demands. Thus it made sense for the battalion to have its own trained despatchers, who could be used as ground troops as well.

For some reason it was felt they had to be NCOs, and I was the only lance corporal in 11 Troop at the time. Initially, I was reluctant to go because despatchers were non-combatant personnel. But the thought of two weeks in the comfort of Salisbury was an enticing carrot and I finally agreed.

We would be doing a lot of jumping on the course, and in the safe and sterile environment of New Sarum Air Base, this too was an enticing prospect,

Charlie Warren and the Commando Quartermaster, Johnny Norman, were also nominated for the course.

Although we had to sleep in barracks we were officially attached to the Air Force for two weeks, and this left us virtually free to do as we pleased. We could come and go as we wished and wear whatever we wanted, and I really relished this newfound freedom.

I enjoyed the course and soon learnt all aspects of despatching. While we were there, a squad of Rhodesian African Rifles soldiers were doing a basic parachute training course at the school. This was fortuitous, for it gave us the opportunity to practise our new skills in realistic circumstances.

It was one of my first encounters with black paratroopers. Parachuting might well have been alien to white troops, but to black soldiers it was downright terrifying.

During their CSPEP container jump, one RAR private forgot to release his thirty-kilogram load and plummeted heavily to the ground as a result.

He was lucky to suffer only two broken legs.

After we had completed our training, the Air Force came to rely heavily on us, and as only eight men from the battalion had attended the initial course, we found ourselves greatly in demand.

We were to spend much of our time in future being shuffled around the country, from one fireforce to the next, and from one unit to another.

I despatched for 1 Commando, Support Commando, various companies of the Rhodesian African Rifles, the Selous Scouts and, of course, my own 3 Commando.

Occasionally we were called on to assist in the parachuting of supplies to Special Air Service groups operating in Moçambique, and I found flying over enemy territory at night exhilarating.

After staring down into the darkness below, sometimes for often lengthy periods, one would suddenly see the marker lights of the drop zone twinkle on and hear the command, 'Red light on!'

We would bundle the container over the lip, and out into the black void, then hurriedly scramble to get the next one.

Soon all the containers would be floating earthwards, and the pilot would do another circuit over the DZ, watching the drift of the 'chutes. Then when he had seen the containers had landed on target, he would turn and give us the thumbs up.

We were regularly shot at whilst on fireforce duties.

A Dakota seemed to me a big target and I would duck instinctively when green tracers flashed past the door.

Sometimes the aircraft would take a hit or two, and I remember landing at Mtoko once after we had dropped our load of troops, and finding six bullet holes in the fuselage.

Fortunately there was no serious damage. But we knew it needed only one lucky shot to blow us out of the sky.



CHAPTER 23

Night Ambush – December 1977

O

ne of my first commands as a junior lance corporal was to take a stick out for a week-long OP in the Mudzi Tribal Trust Land.

The rocky hill on which we had been told to mount our observation post overlooked a vast, tribally populated plain bordering the white farming areas near Mtoko.

Almost all the OPs I had been on had produced negative results. This was possibly because we had been unwittingly compromised by the countless mujibas scouring the hills and kopjes with their herds of cattle and goats, looking for Security Force patrols and OPs. But more than likely we'd been sent to areas where there were very few guerrillas.

But I would like to think we always manned an OP in the most clandestine and professional of manners.

One of the main reasons for our lack of success was, I believe, because we rarely spent enough time in one place. This made it difficult, in fact almost impossible, to build up a coherent pattern of black civilian activities in the area.

The territorial battalions had more success than we did, because they spent all their service in specific areas and their local knowledge was therefore first class.

Our approach to a hill – OPs were nearly always on hills because of the superior view of the surrounding countryside they naturally provided – was always executed at night and with painful stealth and diligence.

We went to extreme lengths to conceal our spoor, even to the extent of straightening strands of long grass we might have inadvertently flattened. And when crossing streams we removed our boots so that when we reached the far side, we wouldn't leave boot prints in the sand of the streambanks.

It was the classic game of cat and mouse and the enemy was rarely obvious. But the tell-tale signs, no matter how small, were always there for an astute tracker to see.

Fresh leaves on a path... a recently broken twig... a toe scuff in the sand... a speck of blood on the bark of a tree. Or sometimes it was more obvious, like an AK round accidentally dropped from a guerrilla's chest webbing.

But it was noticing the almost insignificant but tell-tale signs which kept you alive.

Sometimes instead of visual signs, a smell was indicative.

Perhaps the pervading whiff of napalm burning into flesh after a contact, or it might be the traces of a camp fire where one shouldn't be.

That night I was reasonably satisfied with the way my stick had got to the OP. No dogs had barked and no instances had occurred of noisy crowds at tribal beer parties suddenly going quiet.

Once in position we settled down for the night. Malcolm Nicholson, a new arrival from Scotland, took first watch. Unlike many of those from overseas, he had not served in the ranks of an army before coming to Rhodesia. Nicholson had been an apprentice in Glasgow when he impulsively decided to come to Rhodesia and join the RLI. He had a keen mind however, combined with a natural soldiering ability.

Our vigil commenced and it seemed to me that we remained undetected.

Talk was kept to a bare minimum, and when we spoke it was in soft whispers. Even the unwrapping of cellophaned rations was done beneath a sleeping-bag or a combat jacket to muffle sounds, no matter how slight.

On the fourth day at the OP, I was sitting against a rock, reading a book after having cooked myself a meal of fried corned beef, rice, butter and onions. Boetie Pennekan, a well-built nineteen-year old South African who was totally at home in the bush, was on the OP.

Suddenly the radio fractured the lazy silence and I groped frantically for the volume control, fearing it was too loud.

‘Three One Charlie... Three One Charlie... This is Three Zero.’

‘Three Zero... Three One Charlie... Go.’

‘Roger... Stand by for Sunray’

Sunray?...Oh, shit!

What did the bloody major want with me?

What had I done wrong now?

‘Hello, Three One Charlie... This is Sunray Three Zero,’ said the major, coming on the air.

‘Three One Charlie... go.’

‘Roger, Three One Charlie... a farmer near yours had his store broken into last night. Suspected twenty plus Charlie Tangos. They are probably heading east into Moçambique.’

I hurriedly wrote down the locstat.

‘I want you to romeo victor with the farmer, alpha sierra papa and follow up... Copied?’

‘Copied that.’

‘Give us a shout when you’re on the tracks.’

‘Roger.’

I laid out my map and decoded the grid reference the major had given me. Having pinpointed the farm, I calculated it was about five kilometres from our position. There were still a few hours of daylight left and I was confident we could make the farm by nightfall.

We couldn’t stay clandestine any longer – not now that we had an urgent objective.

Within minutes we were ready to move. (Unless being used at that very moment, our kit was always packed away in case we had to move out in a hurry.)

As dusk fell we crossed the boundary of the tribal trust land into the adjacent white farming area and shortly afterwards we arrived at the farm homestead.

The farmer, who sported a bright red beard, was expecting us. I noticed that he stroked his beard almost non-stop as he told us what had happened.

A gang of ZANLA guerrillas had come on to his farm the previous night. They had rounded up the entire labour force at gun point, then had broken into the farm store where they had stolen everything, using the farm labourers as porters to move the goods away.

‘I know where they’re going,’ said the farmer, ‘They’ll be heading for the Ruenya River where all their base camps are. They’ve got too much loot to cache it locally.’

‘How can you be sure?’ I asked.

‘Because they always go that way. The river goes into Moçambique and they can always gap it there if they are attacked.’

‘How far d’you think they’ve gone?’

‘Um... probably about thirty kays.’

‘D’you know their route?’

‘Oh ja... like the back of my hand. They use a path that goes through the bush and over the border.’

‘Could you guide us in the dark so we can lay an ambush ahead of them?’

‘Of course, I’ll take you there tonight in the PATU Hyena.’

I considered his proposal. Going by vehicle would certainly put us ahead and save a lot of walking. On the other hand the noise of the engine might alarm the guerrillas.

I weighed the pros and cons, and after some minutes decided to accept his offer. (One of the ‘cons’ was that undoubtedly the major would have expected us to walk)

The farmer and I studied the map and worked out the best drop-off point. Then he provided us with a quick meal which we gulped down before piling into the back of his PATU truck.

Twenty minutes later the vehicle halted, and we debussed hurriedly while the farmer kept the revs up as a cover. Moments later he drove on to the Internal Affairs keep that was three kilometres further down the road.

We had no difficulty in finding the track the farmer had told us about. It was about a metre wide and obviously well used.

The stick deployed and we set out westwards, straddling the track. As we marched I kept my eyes open for a good ambush position. But the ground was flat and featureless and the thin scattering of trees and rocks afforded little cover, more so because it chanced to be a brilliantly moonlit night.

We had walked about two kilometres when we came to a dry stream bed that was sparsely lined with scrub and bushes.

We crossed over.

‘Christ, what’s that?’ suddenly whispered Bernard nervously.

‘Eh?... What?’

‘Listen!’

The eerie, tramp, tramp of shuffling feet could be heard faintly, not very far away.

‘Oh, fuck – it’s them,’ hissed Bernard. ‘It has to be.’

We waited, our ears cocked to the wind as the tramping sounds grew louder.

There was no doubt that a great many people were walking down the path towards us.

I signalled, and we flung ourselves into what cover there was... and waited, our hearts in our mouths.

The dark shape of a column of people came into view.

Their movement had suddenly become almost totally silent. They were walking on soft sand and they seemed to be approaching like a sort of huge slithering wraith.

I estimated there were over a hundred people there... most would be the press-ganged civilian porters.

‘The gooks will be in front,’ I whispered. ‘Don’t shoot until I do.’

Boetie Pennekan wriggled into a comfortable position behind his MAG. ‘Sssh, they’re coming.’

‘Don’t fucking shoot until I do,’ I warned again.

‘Okay’

The head of the column drew level with our position and I saw it was led by four or five guerrillas. More of the enemy were strung out on the flanks of the column as guards.

Shit!... How could we account for as many guerrillas as possible and at the same time avoid killing civilians as well?

One or two would be acceptable but I needed no bloody ‘My Lai’ incident.

I argued with myself briefly and came to a decision. Screw it, they were accompanying the gooks weren’t they? Whether they were innocent or guilty, willing or unwilling they would just have to suffer the consequences... Yet somehow I failed to convince myself.

Then I realised belatedly, that while hesitating I had allowed the two lead guerrillas to get a few metres too deep into our makeshift killing zone. I raised my rifle and aimed at the one in front. He had an AK tucked under his arm and was wearing a broad-brimmed bush hat, turned up Australian fashion on one side.

I was about to squeeze the trigger when a guerrilla to the rear spotted us lying there in our paltry cover, and yelled out an alarm.

I nudged the trigger, and my first shot started the firefight.

My target snatched at his leg and stumbled, then disappeared into the cover of the river bed. Although I obviously had hit him, experience told me his wound was only superficial.

The guerrillas' other lead scout had also disappeared into cover by the time Pennekan's MAG hammered into life, criss-crossing the area with red tracers, as my two riflemen fired madly into the mass of humanity.

The captured porters screamed and cried out in pain and panic as they dropped the captured goods and fled, desperately trying to escape the carnage... But I knew there had to be five or six guerrillas sheltering in the donga.

Then they began returning fire. They were only about twenty metres from us and their bullets soon found the range and cracked close above our heads.

Shrinking closer to the ground I fired and fired and fired.

Suddenly I became acutely aware that my buttocks were protruding in the air at a ludicrous angle.

What a ripe target for a stray AK round.

Pennekan had swung his MAG on to the new target and was calmly firing into the river bed, oblivious of the green tracers lashing the dirt in front of him.

Suddenly he stopped, and I heard him grunt, 'Jesus, the bastard's shot me in the hand!'

He ceased firing briefly and inspected his left hand. Then, satisfied it was only a flesh wound, he returned to the battle.

I decided the only way we would get the guerrillas out of the donga was by using grenades.

'Keep firing,' I bawled, 'I'm going to chuck in a grenade.'

I pulled the pin and was up on my knees in one movement.

It was a good throw and the grenade arched lazily over the thorn bushes and plonked down in the dry river bed.

There was a muffled 'crump' as it exploded.

Encouraged, I pulled out a white phosphorus grenade and lobbed that in too for good measure. It detonated with a dull crack, spewing out fountains of brilliant phosphorus, and the shooting from the enemy petered out.

We ceased firing.

A pungent smell of burning phosphorus filtered towards us, and we waited and listened, our every sense straining.

It was very quiet – too quiet.

I decided to withdraw. If the gooks had any sense they would start mortaring us. If we stayed where we were, we would get it.

I glanced briefly at the myriad formless shapes that were lying along the path for at least a hundred metres. I couldn't see if they were bodies or boxes of loot from the store. But my curiosity would just have to wait until morning.

We withdrew quietly, laying up about five hundred metres from the contact area. We waited there for an hour until I was satisfied there was no enemy counterattack in the offing.

Then we retired to the safety of the Internal Affairs keep.

Bernard brewed up some coffee while I radioed my report to the major, who had been sound asleep. He told us to return to the contact area at first light and RV with a stick of Selous Scouts. They would conduct a follow-up operation.

At dawn we returned to the contact area in the grey morning mist. Incredibly, there was only one dead civilian – a teenage girl who had been caught in the chest by a stray bullet. The rest of the formless shapes of the previous night turned out to be stolen goods from the store. The area was liberally littered with bundles of dresses, sewing-machines, boxes of sweets and biscuits, and cases of bottled cool drinks.

There were three dead guerrillas.

Bernard discovered one hidden in the lee of the sandy river bed. He was curled in a foetal position, his body pitted with the black scorch marks of white phosphorus. There were two others lying in the killing zone and I suddenly noticed that one was still alive.

He was lying on his back, an SKS carbine by his side. His chest moved almost imperceptibly and a faint rasping sound came from his throat. He was riddled with bullets, probably from the MAG. It seemed unbelievable he could still be alive after all that.

I looked at him for a long moment, deciding what to do... Well, he was going to the anyway.

'Sort him out,' I ordered Nicholson.

'Hey? You mean you want me ter gi'e him medical treatment?'

'No, he's past it.'

Nicholson nodded.

He picked up the guerrilla's SKS and examined the bayonet. The SKS bayonet was known as a pig-sticker because of its long, skewer-like shape.

'Can I use this, corp?'

'Use what you fucking well want,' I snapped. 'Just get it over with.' I was very tired.

He rolled the guerrilla on to his side with his foot, then raising the SKS vertically, he plunged the bayonet down into his exposed temple.

The guerrilla grunted involuntarily through his unconsciousness but stubbornly refused to die.

'He will na' die,' said Nicholson with disgust.

Holding the guerrilla's head down with his boot he yanked out the blade.

Again and again Nicholson stabbed it deep into the man's brains, getting more furious each time because his victim just wouldn't die.

Then, while he was wondering what to do next, the guerrilla twisted in a violent convulsion and died with a final wistful belch.

The fanner arrived to pick us up and we loaded everything on to his PATU truck. He was very grateful – he had recovered almost everything that had been stolen. The thrills of battle were definitely losing their edge.

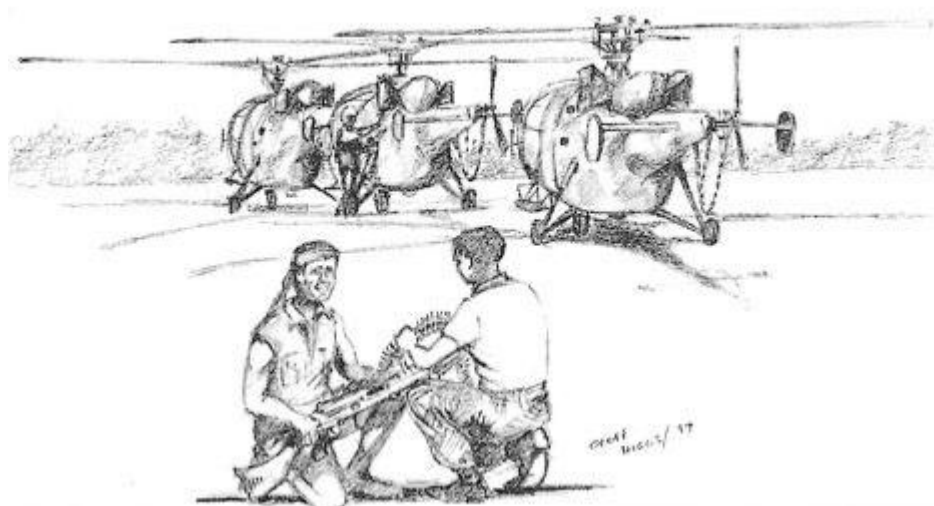
Extracts from letters to my fiancée – December 1977

... I am very depressed as I write this letter. This afternoon I am flying to Buffalo Range to despatch for Support Commando and they said I will be there until further notice. It might be for as long as eight weeks, but I hope they aren't as heartless as that ... We have just spent six days in the bush, which wasn't too bad as it only rained twice. Yesterday we did an operation in Moçambique and you should have seen the looting. We brought back typewriters, stoves, a truck, five tractors plus masses of kit and weapons. I just went for the cigarettes and tinned fish.

I phoned my mum last night to tell her that I wouldn't be back for Christmas ... The heat here is unbelievable and during the day I simply lie on my bed and feel lethargic. Support Commando returns to Salisbury on the 17th January and with luck I will go back with them.

... I am writing from Shabani as we moved from Chiredzi yesterday. I am very bored and I feel listless ... This place is terrible. There are no showers, no trees and it rains at least twice a day. When it is not raining it is extremely hot and humid. I have managed to get into the only brick building in the place and I hope I don't get lucked out.

...Christmas Day 1977 I am writing from Fort Victoria as we moved from Shabani yesterday. I hope we don't have to move again. I have again managed to get the only brick building in the camp and I'm sharing it with the other despatcher, a Norwegian, and about two hundred parachutes. I have even wangled a mattress for myself. Luxury!.. It is very difficult not to get depressed and the weather doesn't help. It never seems to stop raining and today it drizzled all day long.



CHAPTER 24

A Christmas Message

(From Issue 2 of 'The Cheetah', successor to the RLI Newsletter.)

GENERAL WALLS' XMAS MESSAGE

"I was delighted to receive the first edition of 'Cheetah', the regimental newsletter in a new and attractive format. At the same time, I was honoured and privileged to be invited to write a Christmas message for this issue.

Christmas is traditionally a time for families to draw together, spiritually, mentally and, where possible, physically, and I welcome and applaud the renewed efforts by the RLI Association to keep all those who wear the Green and Silver in touch with each other. The Association has done good work in the past; may the present surge of effort result in even greater effectiveness.

It seems so many years ago that I took my leave of the Regiment as CO, but what I said then still applies, and is even more appropriate now. I remarked that when the going became really tough, and when all the chips are down, I hoped I would find myself among the RLI guys and bolstered by their morale, spirit, and fighting qualities. With the RLI on our side, we can only be winners! But more than that, the camaraderie and will to fight, provide the best environment in which to be. The going hasn't become all that tough and the final play is not yet to hand, but we live in momentous times, when the future of our civilisation and standards are at stake. Thank God for the incredible RLI; the country owes you so much, and I have so much pride in still 'belonging' through the Association,

A happy Christmas to all members and families of the Regiment and the Association; and full confidence in the maintenance of standards, opportunities and pursuit of happiness in 1978 and beyond.

Mtoko

8th January 1978

My Darling Col,

I am writing this letter from Mtoko as we never went to Karoi at all. Firstly I must apologise for the delay in writing, but as soon as I arrived here I was told that I only had two hours in which to prepare for a four-day patrol. So it was all very hectic. I have just got back after having walked for miles and miles in the pouring rain. We have been put on fireforce and my stick is on para. I am dreading it as I haven't jumped for over three months.

I believe that in April we might be changing to five-week bush trips, with a two-week R and R. It sounds like good news.

It is now midday on the 8th and I have been in the army for exactly two years to the day. Only one more year to go.

We have just been to the rifle range but the shoot was called off as it was raining. Do you remember our new troop officer, Lieutenant Forbes, who was at that 11 Troop party? We all thought he was a bit of a jerk, but he has turned out to be a really nice guy. He is very unsure of himself and we have to encourage him continually. Anyway, the poor fellow's wife has just had a miscarriage and he is back in Salisbury with her. So I now find myself in command of 11 Troop. Big deal hey?

10th January 1978

... There is less than a month of the bush trip to go but it doesn't seem to go fast enough. I must apologise for the unsteady writing but I dislocated my finger playing baseball yesterday. Also please excuse the grubby marks on the paper but I am covered in black camouflage cream as we have just got back from a callout.

As well as the operational jump, we also did a practice jump this morning. I was apprehensive as I haven't jumped for a while. Thank goodness my stick is now heliborne.

Charlie Norris celebrated his twenty-first birthday yesterday so we threw him in the mud and sprayed him with Coke. Then we all got drunk and made him drink all sorts of vile concoctions. Warren and I had a good laugh this morning in the Dakota because Charlie was vomiting all over the place.

Not much is going on here at the moment and it is getting a bit boring. I read a lot and play cards. There is even a TV here.

Trevor Schoultz is back in Salisbury and I believe he might be going to Stoke Mandeville in the UK, which is supposedly one of the best rehabilitation centres in the world. Many of the soldiers who get shot up in Northern Ireland seem to end up there. Some farmers from Umvukwes have offered to pay all expenses for his trip, which I think is decent of them.

I am seriously thinking of doing a PJI (Parachute Jump Instructor) course. The course is four months long and is conducted in Salisbury. One does go to the bush to despatch, but it's only for three weeks at a time, I would be a sergeant and there is a lot more pay involved.

11th January 1978

... The commando got its first kill of the bush trip. There are masses of gooks around here, but we just can't seem to find the bastards.

I remembered something the other day which I found astounding. My grandmother and I were at the Victoria Falls on holiday in December 1976. As a matter of curiosity I went and visited a witchdoctor who threw his bones. He told me that I was unattached and in the army. He also said that midway through 1977 I would meet my future wife. He said she would be slightly younger than me and come from a small town about eighty kilometres outside Salisbury. I had forgotten about it but I remembered the other day and realised everything had come true.

Pudding, the Commando Clerk, is making enquiries for me about this PJI course and I am getting very keen.

15th January 1978

... It was great to speak to you yesterday. I'm sorry if I sounded a bit funny but we are not allowed to say much on the 'phone. We have been on a callout all day near Mrewa. I jumped in and forgot to tuck my head into my chest as I was landing and it was whipped rather vigorously against the ground. It gave me a terrible headache.

I really laughed at Mesham. He landed on the fence of a cattle pen and nearly lost his manhood. He then toppled over and landed in a foot of fresh cow shit. Anyway, we didn't get any kills as the gooks had got away, although we found their camp which had a lot of propaganda leaflets and posters lying around. All were most abusive about Ian Smith.

I have just been told that I am going back on despatching duties, which will give me a nice break, We have been called out every day since we got here and it has been tiring and wet. At least I can now get down to some serious cards.

I think we will be moving into barrack rooms soon, which is good news because there is a leak in the tent and water drips on my bed.

I have just got word that Charlie Warren's stick has been attacked by gooks and he is pinned down at the moment. What little hair he has will mm prematurely grey! Charlie Norris is evidently there as well.

I will let you know as soon as something happens about this course. I have to give dates and submit three applications, so it is rather involved. I don't know if 3 Commando will let me go as we are desperately short of stick leaders.

Lieutenant Cronin, the American officer, was looking through my photos the other day and he said he was impressed with you. He said I had good taste which made my heart swell.

It is pouring with rain and the damned stuff is dripping on my legs. I had a good laugh this afternoon. The choppers came in, all flying in formation, which looked really impressive. As they were landing our blokes ran on to the runway, pulled down their pants and gave 'brown eyes' to the pilots. One of the chopper techs threw a smoke grenade at the blokes and the pilot hovered his machine above covering them all in dust.

PS. My bed is surrounded with water; I feel like an island.

16th January 1978

... I have just found out that I have to go on patrol in a nearby TTL for five days, so I thought I'd write before I left.

Nothing has happened yet about this course. I am getting sick of this place and fed up with the battalion. The bullshit here is unbelievable and the officers are a pain in the arse, except for Lieutenant Cronin who is a decent fellow. He doesn't shout and scream.

If you look in today's paper you will see a photo of a few 3 Commando fellows meeting some Yank senator. Big deal.

I have been playing cards all day and have lost every game. This afternoon we played baseball and lost that as well. But it was a good game. I will close now as the lights are going off.

21st January 1978

... It is now nine o'clock in the evening. Since I phoned you I have cleaned my rifle and shaved. I have also bought four beers to celebrate having spoken to you. I am now in my tent by myself.

I have just spent about the worst five days of my army life. We were on an OP watching the locals in their kraals below. We got soaked. I used to lie in my sleeping-bag at night and it would start to rain. Oh f--k, I thought as I hid under my sleeping-bag, as if that would help! Slowly you would feel the water creeping up your legs until it was all over you. How we cursed. I chide myself for being such an idiot as to ever get into this damned army.

Morale here is really low because of all the bullshit that goes on. It is not so bad being a corporal, but I really feel sorry for the troopies. I told you that ten blokes have applied for transfer and the major refused all of them. He said he won't consider any other applications, the swine. Charlie Warren asked for discharge from the army and was told in no uncertain terms that he couldn't have one. I think all these events might put a damper on my course for a while.

22nd January 1978

... Please forgive me as I was unable to phone tonight. There were so many people at the phone that I would never have got through by the time my radio watch started at 2030hrs. Radio watch is not so hot because you have to stay awake for four hours.

I've had a busy day today as I have been patching up some wounded blacks. This morning, troop medics were called to the hospital to help fix up some farm labourers who had hit a landmine. We sorted out about ten in all, although a couple died during treatment. There were eight dead in all.

We also patched up a white fanner who had suffered broken ribs and got shrapnel in his legs. The poor chap was in agony. The hospital was like a butcher's shop, with the Doc running around chopping off all the arms and legs needing amputation. It was good medical experience for me.

I felt a bit sorry for the blacks. The farm boss-boy came to pick them up for work and they were apparently reluctant to get on the trailer. It seems they knew the gooks had planted landmines on the road but they didn't want to tell the farmer, so I suppose it serves them right they hit one. Still, it shows you the terror the gooks can instil in them.

It is now the next morning and there has been another callout. I am not going as I am Stop 4 and there are only three choppers. Evidently the fireforce is going to land at Shamva, as the gooks have been sighted just north of there. I would like to have gone, but I'm sure seeing your folks' farm would have made me homesick.

1st February 1978

... You won't believe it, but bad luck has struck again. I am depressed. Just after I wrote you the last letter I was nominated for the PJI course so I thought there was no point in writing as I would be home with you.

Yesterday though, I was told by the captain I wouldn't be going on the course because there was a shortage of instructors. He said that Battalion HQ had ordered I be sent to despatch RAR troops based at Dorowa. Unfortunately, I would have to miss R and R, but after four weeks with RAR I would be relieved and could take R and R then. I felt I was going to burst into tears. The captain felt sorry for me and said he would try to get me on the next PJI course in April. He knows we are getting married and want to settle down... Christ, I've really had enough of this army... The lads here have been very good about it and seem concerned for you.

Your ever-loving
Chris.



BOOK FOUR

1978

A LUTA CONTINUA!





CHAPTER 25

The Caves of Mtoko – January 1978

F

Fireforce Mtoko was a 'hot-spot' - probably on par with Fireforce Grand Reef. There was always action. The new year of 1978 was to prove no different. As was the ritual we checked the 'Stick List' every evening on the blackboard outside the mess tent.

Stop Groups One, Two and Three were the first wave of heliborne troops. Stops Four, Five and Six were the second wave. Callsigns Banana One to Banana Five were the paras. There was a vague system which was supposedly rotational, that is – one week para, one week heliborne. But it didn't always work like that - particularly if the duty officer in charge of drawing up the roster didn't personally like para duties.

The 'Stick List' on the evening prior to the morning of what came to be known as 'The Cave Scene' read as follows:

Stop 1 - Cpl Smith
Stop 2 - L/Cpl Cocks
Stop 3 - L/Cpl McCall
Stop 4 - Sgt Abbott
Stop 5 - L/Cpl Condon
Stop 6 - L/Cpl Simpson

Banana 1 - L/Cpl Warren
Banana 2 - Lt. Cronin
Banana 3 - Sgt Taylor
Banana 4 - Tpr. Gibson
Banana 5 - L/Cpl Fletcher

I breathed a sigh of relief. I wasn't on para - and what's more only one officer and two sergeants were included in the line-up. (We junior NCOs and troopies felt we knew how the war should be conducted - without the likes of officers and senior NCOs getting in the way). I was pleased - the other stick leaders were all good men whom I could trust. Mesham was my gunner, Botes and Argyll my riflemen. We'd all worked together before and had no problems. It was important.

The siren wailed midway through breakfast and as usual we all jumped. Cutlery and crockery lay scattered and abandoned as we grabbed for our webbing and weapons. In a short time my stick was airborne aboard Yellow Two.

I smiled as I watched Botes cramming the remnants of his bacon and egg sandwich into his mouth, and as the chopper pilot glanced sideways to his left he appeared oblivious to the trooper's face, which was now a smear of camouflage cream and congealed egg yolk.

Mesham, half out the chopper, was still trying to untangle the MAG belt that had somehow got hooked up in his sling.

We'd only been airborne a few minutes when we banked sharply to our left. It looked like we were returning to base. What was happening? I put on the headset to hear if I'd missed anything. Nothing.

Sure enough, within moments Mtoko airfield came into view. We landed and awaited the pilot's signal to deplane. It didn't come, nor did the pilot shut down.

I nudged the chopper tech next to me and shouted to him 'What's happening?'

He grinned at me and pointed at a figure running from the K-car parked up ahead.

'The K-car tech. Barrel fell off the 20 mill!'

I told the rest of the stick who laughed hysterically, and moments later the embarrassed K-car technician came back into view with a replacement barrel, which he angrily clipped onto the 20mm cannon, giving it a slap for good measure.

The contact area came into view as the choppers started circling, faithfully following the K-car. I glanced up. The Lynx was there in orbit awaiting the signal to pounce. The Dak also had arrived and was drifting lazily about a few kays to the east.

Everything was in place. The major in the K-car would soon make his move.

Yellow One peeled off left. Our pilot pointed to a clearing on the edge of a maize land about a kay ahead and I gave him a thumbs-up in acknowledgement as the chopper tech crouched over his guns... The troops in the chopper needed no telling. We were going in.

Mesham snuggled his MAG into his body, with a final check that everything was in place. Botes was licking his lips distractedly. They were bloodless. The chopper flared over the LZ, stirring up a storm of dust as we deplaned and scuttled to the nearest cover. Desultory fire could be heard in the distance. What did that mean? Were the gooks here or was it just another stick clearing cover?

I took in our surroundings. They were tailor-made for the guerrillas - a small riverline shrouded in foliage for their water supplies; lands of maize and pumpkins sweeping up the higher ground for their food; and the kraal on the edge of the lands for the women and mujibas.

Backed up behind the village were a series of rocky outcrops and small kopjes. If the gooks were here, I thought, that's where they'd be.

Doof, doof, doof. The K-car was firing into the area of the kopjes.

'Stop 2, Three Nine,' the voice of the major crackled over my headset.

'Three Nine, Stop 2.'

'Roger Chris. I want you to sweep up the edge of the maize field and RV with Smith and McCall at the village.'

Copied'. I signalled to the others and we fanned out. Bob Smith's stick was waiting for us on the edge of a kraal, huddled behind a cattle pen. As usual Bob had a cigarette dangling out of his mouth.

'We're just waiting for McCall to join us,' he said 'and then we 'ave to sweep up those frigging gomos. Where's that poxy Yank anyway - always frigging late!'

A few minutes later McCall with his stick came into view, and we fanned out into a swepline under Bob's control. His stick took the centre, McCall was on the right flank and I took the left. The village was deserted, but it hadn't been so for long. All the signs pointed to a hurried departure - doors ajar, cooking fires still smouldering.

We came to a cave fifteen minutes later, and crouched in cover about thirty metres from its mouth. Somehow we all knew that this was the

guerrilla hideout. Fresh spoor criss-crossed the ground if any confirmation was needed..

‘Chris - Hugh,’ Bob whispered over the radio, ‘RV on me.’

I signalled to the rest of my stick to stay put, and bent double as I scurried over to Bob. I squatted next to Hugh as Bob outlined his plan.

‘Right lads, I reckon the buggers could still be in there. Hugh, I want you to take your stick on the right flank and try and get up behind the cave. Quite often these sods have escape holes at the back’

Hugh nodded.

‘Chris, you and your lot are to skirmish up on the left and see if you can’t get into the cave from that side.’

I must have gulped and Bob noticed my discomfort.

‘Don’t worry Chris, we’ll be covering you from here. Anyway, why don’t you send in Botes and Mesham? Nashos are expendable,’ He grinned wryly.

Botes and Mesham blanched visibly as I broke the news to them on my return to the stick.

‘Fuck that corp. You can court-martial me or whatever, I’m not going in that fucking cave,’ stuttered Botes. Mesham nodded vigorously in agreement.

‘Stop whining and let’s get on with it.’

We picked our way warily up through the rocks towards the cave, waiting for the inevitable burst of gunfire. But it didn’t come. We scrambled into the lee of a boulder that shielded us from the opening of the cave. Now what? We sat for several moments, listening for movement inside the cave. There was nothing.

‘Just chuck in an H.E. corp,’ whispered Botes. ‘Grenades will sort them out - one time.’

‘Uh-uh, not yet,’ I replied. ‘We’ve gotta try at least once. Simon, you and I are going to give it a crack. We’ll follow the left wall. If anything happens we drop to ground and give them a snotty’

Mesham nodded bleakly, looking as if he had just been sentenced to death. I stepped into the open, my heart in my mouth. Mesham was at my elbow with his MAG at the ready. At least that was comforting.

In contrast to the sunlight the almost total blackness inside the cave was terrifying. One step at a time, Mesham and I gingerly stepped inside the cave with our backs to the cold stone wall in an effort to break up our

outlines and merge in with the surroundings. I licked my dry lips, thinking we were no better than sitting ducks as I squinted in the darkness. It was terrifying.

We'd only gone about five paces when we heard a faint clink of metal, and as we dropped to our bellies the world exploded.

From the depths of the cave what sounded like a million AKs opened up. My eyes were squeezed tight as the smoke and the dust threatened to suffocate me and the bullets cracked all around. Surely I must die.

Then the MAG barked into action as Mesham frantically returned fire and I joined him, pumping shot after shot into the black depths of the cave.

'Simon,' I yelled to Mesham, 'let's get out of here!'

He needed no further urging and half crawling, half running we scrambled backwards through the hail of the AK fusillade. As we tumbled breathlessly into the shelter of our boulder, Argyle stepped into our tracks and tossed in a grenade.

The firing from inside stopped as the grenade detonated in a muffled 'crump' seconds later and Argyle chided paternally, 'You should have listened to Botes, corp. You're crazy to've gone in there.'

I was shaking violently as I changed the magazine on my rifle. Then, as I was about to light up a cigarette, a stick grenade came spinning from out of the cave.

'GRENADE!' yelled Argyle as we all dived frantically for cover.

The projectile exploded harmlessly off to the side of us. But it told us one thing - the men inside the cave were alive and well.

'Try a white phos Tom.'

Argyle again stepped out and this time lobbed in a phosphorus grenade... And again a stick grenade came tumbling out.

Tit for tat.

The radio crackled. It was Bob Smith. 'Chris, what's going on?'

'3 or 4 Charlie Tangos inside the cave. I dunno how to get them out.'

'Roger, I'll be with you now'.

The K-car was above us, like a vulture homing in on a kill, and the major's voice came tinnily across the radio...

'Stop 2, Three Nine.'

'Go.'

'Roger. Do you want us to lay down some 20 mill?'

‘Negative, the gooks are too far in - and I think there’s a bend inside the cave.’ (Undoubtedly this ‘bend’ had saved me and Mesham, as I presumed the guerrillas had not had a direct field of fire).

‘What about sneb or fran?’

‘Negative. Our H.E. and white phos haven’t worked so I scheme that’s a waste of time.’

Another burst from the cave let us know they were still there. Bob Smith and his stick arrived and I filled him in as to the situation. It transpired that McCall’s stick had found a narrow aperture in the rocks about thirty metres around the back.

‘What’s an aperture?’ asked Botes.

‘It’s American for “hole”,’ retorted Smith, ‘now wind your neck in.’

‘Why don’t we call in a SWAT team?’, Botes persisted.

‘Botes, shut up or you’re going in there by yourself!’

‘Or dogs?’

‘We could always starve them out,’ suggested Mesham.

‘Or tear-gas?’

‘Dynamite?’

The suggestions came thick and fast until Bob had had enough. ‘Alright, shut up all you lot,’ he bellowed. ‘The obvious thing to do is to try and get them to surrender.’

We watched sceptically as he wriggled into a position near the cave entrance.

‘Comrades,’ he yelled, ‘you cannot escape. You will not be harmed if you surrender now’

The response was a burst of fire which sent Smith scuttling back into our midst.

‘You check?’ said Botes, referring to Bob’s Yorkshire accent. ‘They don’t understand Pommy’

‘Fuck it, let’s try some tear-gas,’ Smith muttered angrily. ‘We’ll try from here and McCall can drop some in from the top.’

An hour later the tear-gas canisters arrived aboard Yellow One and by then I was beginning to get concerned. The light was starting to fade and I had no desire to spend the night at the cave.

Smith sent two troopers up to McCall with a clutch of tear-gas canisters. On Smith’s word we threw in our complement followed by an

array of H.E. and white phos grenades. The din was furious as the MAG gunners fired belt after belt into the cave.

But to no avail. Faint coughing from inside told us the enemy was still there.

The major in the K-car was becoming impatient. Darkness was enveloping the kopjes and he wanted the scene wrapped up by nightfall... At least Bob Smith had convinced him that a full-frontal assault would be suicidal - that was something. But we would have to stay.

When the helicopters went home, a lonely silence shrouded the area as we prepared for the night and posted the guards. None of us felt very hungry for some reason, and when I lay down I managed to sleep only fitfully, interrupted from time to time by the occasional cough or clatter that came from inside the cave. It struck me once as I lay there, that it must be much worse for the men in the cave, trapped and knowing we were there outside. Then I decided that was their problem. We had our own.

As dawn broke we heard the faint throb of a helicopter approaching and a few minutes later, to our complete amazement discovered that aboard Yellow Three were two members of the Police Dog Section, For a moment I thought that it just couldn't be true, that I must be dreaming. But it was... Obviously it had been decided the previous night over drinks in the Mtoko Officers' Mess that the solution was to send in dogs.

We watched with a mixture of sympathy and curiosity as the two dog handlers stumbled up from the LZ with their German Shepherds straining at their leashes. One of them was a white police officer, the other a black constable and both were armed with SLR rifles. But it obvious to us that their webbing and complement of magazines were hopelessly inadequate for their task.

Bob and I briefed them as to the situation. Orders were orders and we did not tell them that what they proposed was madness. We shrugged as they turned away and I felt a pang of pity for the dogs. They were beautiful specimens.

Like spectators we watched as the two handlers entered the cave, their' weapons slung in order to control the dogs.

'They haven't got a clue corp,' Botes whispered to me, his eyes wide with alarm.

The lead dog barked excitedly and as we expected the guerrillas immediately opened fire. We could do nothing but listen to the carnage

inside - the screams, the yelps, the whimpering... And when the shooting stopped a dog was still crying.

Mesham's eyes were misted with tears. It was so futile, so stupid.

We were uplifted by chopper later that morning and replaced by territorials. There was nothing more we could do. Moreover we were required for other fireforce duties - with more accessible targets.

I heard later that the Canberras went in that afternoon and bombed the kopje into oblivion, continuing until they were quite sure that the cave had collapsed.

I can only assume that the guerrillas, the policemen and their dogs still lie buried there today.



CHAPTER 26

Dorowa - February 1978

T

he captain did all he could to stop my posting to Dorowa, but Battalion HQ was adamant. There was simply no one else. I had to go.

I packed my kit and boarded a light aircraft flying to the south-west of Mtoko. I don't recall the pilot saying a word to me during the flight. In fact he barely even glanced at me. Obviously to him it was not something he enjoyed, but a menial task of transporting an item of military baggage that had to be dumped at Dorowa.

The aircraft bumped to a halt on the dusty Dorowa airstrip and I was met by the other despatchers. They were both Air Force men. The senior despatcher, a sergeant major, had been one of my instructors during my basic parachute course. He was a genial Englishman who sported an unusually large handlebar moustache. His assistant was a younger man named Jerry. Jerry and I had done our despatcher's course together.

"Well, well, well - if it isn't Corporal Cocks! Welcome to sunny Dorowa, full of sultry nights and sultry maidens,' laughed the sergeant major.

Dorowa is a tiny village, its economy dependent on a nearby mine for its survival. The first thing that struck me about the place was how brown everything was. There wasn't a touch of greenery anywhere - no trees, no grass. Just barren, dusty veld.

The army base was at the eastern end of the runway. It was fortified against rocket and mortar attacks by a large earthen embankment, and black RAR troops were industriously building more bunkers at their camp.

The RAR were always labouring, yet they rarely complained. We admired them, for they were excellent soldiers, genuinely proud of their units. To them the army was more than just military service. It was a job, a home, and a way of life.

‘Where’s the Dak?’ I asked Jerry as we wandered over to the billets.

I had noticed four helicopters squatting at the side of the airstrip, but there was no Dakota.

‘Oh, it hasn’t come back from Grand Reef. The Dak pilots take it there every night because there’s no protection for it here.

‘So what do we do when there’s no Dak?’

‘Nothing,’ grinned Jerry.

I was taken to the Officers’ Mess. It was a marquee, and I felt conspicuous as I was the only lance corporal. But as I had been seconded to the Air Force I naturally received the same treatment as a ‘blue job’, and they were less formal in their mess life than the ‘browns’.

Some pilots were playing bridge when I entered. A few of them who knew me nodded to me in recognition. So it did not take long to make myself at home.

I was relieved to learn that there was no organised PT and that only the RAR had to run around the airstrip. Sometimes I was invited to play volleyball for the Air Force against the RAR, and I happily joined in.

We were kept busy at Dorowa for there were incessant callouts, and we logged many flying hours in the Dakota. We covered the eastern parts of Rhodesia, and I often felt sorry for the fireforce troops who had to endure long and bumpy flights over mountainous ground while strapped into cumbersome parachute harnesses. At least the despatchers could walk around and get the benefit of the breeze from the rear door.

As I have said before, parachuting was as alien to black troops as it was to Willie Smit, and I could only admire their self-discipline and bravery. Often I could literally smell their terror as they stood up to connect their static-line clips to the overhead cable. Most moved like zombies, as if resignedly preparing for their fate.

When they were ready to jump it was my job to give each of them a final check to ensure their equipment was in order.

Once as I was inspecting a burly machinegunner I felt warm liquid running onto my feet. The poor chap had wet himself. I glanced down at the offending puddle, wishing that for once I had worn proper shoes.

‘Don’t worry about that mate,’ I smiled, patting his shoulder, ‘have a good jump and get lots of kills.’

But he barely glanced at me. His eyes were wide, the whites showing clearly, and his adam’s apple was bobbing as he swallowed hard.

It was hard work for us during the actual jump. Most paras were anxious to get through the door and be done with the agony of waiting, and as they shoved and jostled we were hard-pressed to maintain a semblance of order.

On one occasion, having reached the door one soldier refused to jump. He locked his arms against the cowling above and his legs seemed to become paralysed.

We had been taught what to do in cases like this. They did not occur often but over a drop zone it was imperative that the men behind should not be held up -for, by jumping too late. they would perhaps miss the DZ completely.

We administered karate chops to his arms which released his grip, then bundled him unceremoniously through the door.

In twenty seconds the aircraft was empty except for ourselves and the pilots, and we collapsed onto the vacant seats for a moment before dragging in the static lines and tackling the unpleasant task of cleaning up the aircraft... Paper bags full of vomit had to be thrown through the door and urine mopped up. But once we started it did not take long.

Then the sergeant major said, 'Not bad lads. Less than twenty seconds, in spite of the clown who decided not to go.'

'And the bastard who pissed all over me,' I complained indignantly.

My unsympathetic colleagues laughed.

Much of our time was spent on the logistics of parachuting. We were forever loading and unloading parachutes, and sometimes we flew back to New Sarum to collect resupplies. The trips to Salisbury were frustrating, for they brought me close to my loved ones yet I was unable to see them because time never allowed.

A critical shortage of parachutes had developed and the packers back at New Sarum Air Base were really pushed hard keeping up with the demand.

Our own greatest problem was getting the used parachutes back to Salisbury, and the sergeant major requisitioned any and every available form of transport he could find to achieve this. Every truck heading for Salisbury was loaded to the gunwales with parachutes. Aeroplanes too, were packed with every 'chute that could be squeezed in, even if it was only five or six of them. It all helped.

One evening an Islander aircraft landed and the pilot offered to take some of the parachutes back to Salisbury for us.

Watching us as we loaded he chuckled and said, 'Just leave enough room for me to sit, okay!'

We kept stuffing them in until eventually I began to worry about the weight.

'Sir, are you sure we are not overloading you?' I asked. 'D'you think you'll be able to take off if we put any more on board?'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' said the pilot, 'I can still take a few more.'

We shrugged and carried on loading - presumably he knew his plane better than we did. After we finished we went to the mess for supper.

Just as we sat down to eat there was a massive explosion somewhere to the west.

The Islander obviously was too heavily loaded. It had failed to clear the power lines at the end of the runway and had crashed into the bush.

'Oh, Christ!' exclaimed Jerry. 'The arsehole's gone and killed himself!'

We jumped into a Land-Rover and raced to the scene of the crash.

The aircraft itself was a twisted mass of wreckage festooned with bits and pieces of parachute. But the pilot had miraculously survived and he was lifted out and casevaced back to Grand Reef. He had mined our dinner though, for we had to recover every usable parachute we could from the wreckage and transfer them back to camp.

The days passed slowly, our boredom being relieved only by an occasional flight to New Sarum on parachute resupply trips or now and then to supervise a casevac.

Once we casevaced five territorials who had been blown up and grossly injured in a landmine blast. They were all in a bad way. One was unconscious. Another was moaning softly to himself. He thought he was dying and desperately wanted to see his wife and children again before the end. It was pitiful. They were not professional soldiers and none of them had asked to be involved in the war.

After four months in the bush without a break I began to feel the strain.

When I pointed out this long spell of duty to the sergeant major, he was shocked and began sending signals to Salisbury, requesting I be given

leave. The authorities in town were sympathetic, but because of the worsening manpower shortage they could do nothing about it... They simply had no one to replace me. I began to wonder if I was condemned to spend the rest of my life in the bush... Would I ever go home?

One hot, sultry day Jerry and I were lazing on stretchers beneath a wing of the Dakota. My transistor radio was playing and occasionally a slight breeze disturbed the air beneath the fuselage.

Suddenly our tranquillity was rudely disturbed.

‘Boss! Boss, there’s a man! He try to steal bullets in your tent!’

It was our black batman who had come panting over to the aircraft.

We looked at each other, perplexed.

‘What are you bloody talking about?... What man?’

‘Sure Boss, he steal bullets. Come now... Come!’

I looked around for my rifle. Damn, I had left it in the mess. (Would I ever learn?)

‘Come on, Jerry,’ I urged, ‘grab your rifle.’

We sprinted after the batman towards the tents. Sure enough, as we got there we saw a black man laden with MAG belts clambering over the top of the embankment. We followed him, pausing at the parapet. It was ludicrous - the man was stealing ammunition!

Our quarry was about forty metres away by now, running for the bush line.

‘Hey, you,’ I yelled at the fugitive, ‘stop or we shoot!’ It sounded really corny - but I didn’t know what else to say. Perhaps the fool would come to his senses. This was crazy.

The man paused and glanced briefly back at us. Then he carried on running.

‘Shoot the bastard,’ I said to Jerry.

Jerry cocked his rifle.

‘D’you reckon?’ He hesitated.

‘Shoot the bastard, for God’s sake! He’s stealing our bloody ammo.’

Jerry raised his rifle and fired three deliberate shots. I could see he was a good shottist. The fleeing man staggered to a halt then slowly collapsed to the ground, the MAG belts still wrapped around him.

The sergeant major joined us on the embankment.

‘What the hell’s going on?’

‘That guy just tried to get away with some of our MAG belts,’ I answered. ‘Will you go and get a medic’s pack, sir? I think he’s still alive.’

Jerry and I approached the prostrate form cautiously, and I turned him over on to his back and recovered the ammunition belts.

Jerry had shot him through the chest and the stomach. He was having difficulty breathing. His eyes were agape and he was staring fixedly at me. He was elderly and I couldn’t understand why he had stolen the belts. Maybe the guerrillas had told him to, but why? Our rounds were of no use to them - they used a different calibre.

The sergeant major came with the medic’s pack and a large group of Air Force personnel quickly gathered around. Few came close though, and I realised that it was probably the first time many of them had seen a man shot.

As I searched the man they watched in silence, and gaped in goggle-eyed disbelief as I pocketed the few dollars I found on him.

‘Free beers tonight, Jerry’ I announced, ignoring the spectators.

I stripped off his ragged shirt and stemmed the bleeding with two first-field dressings. But even as I did I knew I was wasting my time. He couldn’t possibly live.

His breathing soon became erratic and his throat started to rattle.

Despite this I applied a drip, asking a young airman to hold up the bag of liquid.

He looked at me aghast and moved back a pace.

‘For Christ’s sake,’ I shouted, ‘the fucker’s not going to bloody bite you!’

Looking sheepish the airman took the drip and held it up gingerly.

‘I think we should casevac him to Grand Reef ASAR’ said the wing commander.

I glanced up.

‘He’ll be dead in ten minutes, sir,’ I said. ‘It would be a waste of time.’

The wing commander looked dubious, as if he felt his rank demanded he be more humanitarian than a corporal. But shortly afterwards the man closed the argument by dying.

We retired to the mess to have a few beers and discussed the exciting event. Naturally Jerry was the hero of the moment. One of the pilots christened him ‘Audie Murphy’.

Our two Dakota pilots, as well as Jerry and the sergeant major were relieved soon after and sent back to Salisbury, and I felt very lonely after they'd left. They had seemed part of a 'family' and I made little effort to get to know the new people. And anyway, I would soon be going back myself on two weeks R and R, so there was little point. I spent my last week there trying to teach the batmen to goose-step and salute Nazi-style.

'No, not "Sig Hello",' I told them. 'It's "Sieg Heil". Now try again.'

The batmen thought it was very funny and tried out their new skills on the wing commander. He laughed, but eventually the practice of giving Nazi salutes was banned. It was evidently in poor taste.

Excerpts from a letter to my fiancée written during March 1978.

.... I arrived in Shabani (it was raining) feeling depressed and hung over. On Tuesday night we went to the club and one of our blokes got involved in a fight. A poor civvy had the hell knocked out of him, even though he was enormous, and one of the 3 Commando guys gave him a lack in the face for good measure. After that, things got a bit out of hand and several more fights broke out. The next morning we were banned from going to town, so I haven't been able to phone... Our R and R certainly isn't going to be as long as two weeks. I don't think we'll even get a week, which isn't very nice. We'll just have to make the most of it... It hasn't rained for four days, but the mud is unbelievable. We have no showers or toilets, so every couple of days we are driven to the rugby club in town to clean up... I haven't been on any scenes yet. Yesterday the commando killed eight and captured others which was good going... There is a BBC news team here at the moment and they're taking movies of everyone. They have only been in the country for two weeks and have already spent \$75,000 on hotels, aeroplanes, etc! I am in the same tent as Charlie Norris and Neville Harding. It is quite waterproof except for the odd hole in the canvas. The weather has turned very cold and winter seems to be approaching... More bad news - I am only allowed to take two weeks' leave to get married. However if I take it so that it coincides with an R and R, I might get four weeks out of it. Pudding reckons I should hang on until nearer the time so I can find out about dates... Some good news - I have been put up from a two-star to five-star soldier, which puts an extra \$15 a month in my pocket as from April. I will also get three months back pay on my Special Unit Allowance, which

amounts to \$150. So, from now on I will be paid an extra \$45 a month. Pudding says my \$800 back pay should be through by June. I have discovered it wasn't his mistake, but a woman sergeant's back at the Battalion Orderly Room.

Yours Chris.

PS. Very bad news - Neville is no longer in our tent. He has been shot in the head and it looks as if he will lose an eye. When will it all stop?



CHAPTER 27

The Cheetah

Excerpts from 'The Cheetah' Magazine

T

he Commando is now 100 percent para-trained including a 'flying' doctor and a 'flying' cook who incidentally, has one operational descent to his credit.

Approximately twenty-five percent of the Commando are presently on various courses which will once again make 'The Lovers' the most highly qualified Commando in the Battalion; thank you, thank you.

Our good wishes accompany Cpl. McCall who has entered into wedlock, and we console him with the admission of many a man before him that 'a man can't always be happy - he has to get married sometime.'

During the last month we have welcomed to the Commando Lt. (Dodgem) Carloni, and 2 Lts. Scheepers and Greenhalgh. At the same time we bade farewell to Lt. Adams who has been posted to 'Hooters'.

We congratulate Cpl. Abbott on his promotion to Sgt, which now qualifies him, if nothing else, to be the scapegoat of the Officers' and Senior N.C.Os' mess.

Towards the end of the last bush trip, after wandering aimlessly through the bush for about four days, Lt. (Jug) Thornton contracted some ghastly disease which has rendered him absolutely useless to the Commando for the next two bush trips. We all, however, wish him a speedy recovery.

Due to an unfortunate reshuffle in the Bn, Lt. J.R Cronin has been appointed 11/C of the Commando, and although Thirteen Troop is undoubtedly relieved, this move has placed the Commando, as a whole, into a state of apprehensive shock, for reasons not published in these notes.

During our last R & R we held a Commando Party, very ably organised by Cpl. (Pudding) Hudson, at which we bade farewell to Maj. Jerry Strong and welcomed our incoming O.C. Capt. Ian Buttenshaw.

LOVER PERSONALITIES

O.C - Maj. Bruce Sneglar recently arrived from Hooterville flushed with theory but now learning what real soldiering is all about. At present attending Len Mommson's daily 'graunch' pending attendance on the next para course; so standing all prospective O.C Threes for the next NOTICAS and posting order. Capt. Ian Buttenshaw who held the reins for a short while, had the misfortune of breaking a leg on his para course and is now serving with D.RR whilst recovering from his injury.

2 I/C - Lt. Jug Thornton, who not only holds the appointments of O.C 14 Tp. and acting 2 I/C 3 Cdo, but for the month of July he also commanded the Cdo. whilst the CO learnt how to break a leg on para course. Who knows what this power crazy subbie will get command of next? To add insult to injury Jug has just completed his PPL. and is often seen swotting up on a EA.F commander's duties as well.

C.M.S/E.Q.M.S - Sgt. 'Shrapnel' John Norman is standing in as chief whip as well as running the quartermaster mustard-to-custard echelons. Now fully recovered from his war wounds, although he has been seen to break out in a cold sweat whenever in the close proximity of a lav.

O.C 11 Tp. - 2 Lt. Fabian Forbes is now a fully qualified 'Mangwanani' specialist having attended the local language course and is at present getting up to date on all current Malayan and Korean training techniques on a 'Snoogle Boogle' course under Maj. Daines (Chief Snoogle Boogle).

O.C 12 Tp. - 2 Lt. Dave Greenhalgh still recovering from his cadetship at Hooterville is now beginning to realise that there are a few basic differences between the Infantry Platoon in battle and our current modus operandi.

O.C 13 Tp. - 2 Lt. Andre Scheepers also new from cadet course is presently baffling all doctors with his rapid recovery from battle wounds and having now experienced his umpteenth skin graft is looking for skin donors - prospective female donors please apply direct to O.C 13 Tp. With luck Andre will be operational again in the very near future.

O.C 14 Tp. - That power crazy Subbie Thornton has temporarily relinquished this appointment to 2 Lt. Gavin Wehlburg - a national service officer who was fortunate enough to be posted to the Lovers. Gavin is presently learning how to exit from moving aircraft in flight.

O.C 15 Tp. - Lt Roger Carloni B.C.R, now a regular officer having served with 3 (Indep) Coy. RAR as a national serviceman. Roger had the task of knocking the newly formed troop into shape and their nickname 'F Troop' bears no resemblance to their performance in the field. Roger has introduced rum, spaghetti and Guido's to the Cdo, not to mention his rare ability to tell jokes without providing a punch line.

Tp. Sgts. - 2 I/C 11 Tp. is that reject from Andrew Fleming Hospital, Sgt. John Coleman, now fully recovered from his war wounds but still getting personal attention on R & R from the hospital staff, who have voluntarily offered to work all hours of the night. 2 I/C 12 Tp. is the newly promoted Sgt. 'The Fonz' Coom, well renowned for his Queen's English, exemplary manners and diplomacy with the W.V.S at Mtoko. Sgt. Coom will soon be engracing Hooterville with his presence on a long tactics course. 2 I/C 13 Tp. is Sgt. 'Lightie' Taylor who is shortly to attempt the Selous Scouts' selection and of late has been seen rubbing concoctions onto his chin in order to introduce some hair growth. 2 I/C 14 Tp. Sgt. Paul Abbott ex Green Jackets, The Legion, Guido's and Tramps, is now swopping mercenary stories/brandy on the Snoogle Boogle Course. 2 I/C 15 Tp, Sgt. 'Hook' le Roux, who is despondent about everything including his own despondency, is still unquotable on RWS attributes and race relations.

EX-LOVERS

Our ex-C.S.M. Ken Reed has now been promoted to W.O.I and appointed R.S.M 1 RL.I and it was pleasing to note that even the battle-hardened Strike Force knew where to look for true talent. Naturally we are sorry to lose him but are proud that a Lover was chosen for that esteemed position. Good luck R.S.M and remember where your loyalties lie on the parade square.

Capt. John 'The Yank' Cronin who served and fought with the Lovers has now been posted to the staff of J.O.C Grapple. We wish him luck in his new appointment.

TROOPIE NEWS

The members of National Service Intake 156 are leaving after long and creditable service with the Cdo. Civvie Street will not hear of all the good deeds and hard-fought battles, but certainly the Lovers will remember and we wish you all well in your chosen careers. When the dust has settled and you have sampled that boring, humdrum life of a civilian, then don't hesitate to come back and attempt our selection course for reintroduction to the Cdo.

Congratulations go to Cpl. Gibson and L/Cpl. Cocks on their forthcoming marriages and for trading in bachelorhood for in-laws and hire-purchase firms. It must have taken some appreciation to settle on that course of action!

Welcomes to the following new members of 3 Cdo. Cpl. Wandel, Trprs. Serfontein, Clarke, Benz, Bezuidenhout and Weaver. Hope they are able to live up to the traditions of the Lovers.

Cpl. Harris is now back with us having volunteered for every available course. L /Cpl. Condon is about to set a record by completing one full bush trip and L/Cpl. Warren is still trying to live down the scandal of his outing in town when he earned the alias of 'Spud'. Cpl. Bob Smith's taxi-beating routine narrowly avoided him from receiving a third tape. L /Cpl. McCall is now a proud father and having just qualified as a dispatcher is no doubt teaching his babe side-rights off the cot. Goodbyes go to Trprs. Schellevert and Bertolini who have gone A.W.O.L - up theirs! Cpl. Hughes is mentioned for his vicious attack on an innocent, unsuspecting goalkeeper with his glass jaw. Tpr. 'Flex' Nicholl who flexed his muscles once too often and ripped the tendons from his heel to his knee whilst attempting to stop the 14 Tp. thug Budgie Holmes from gaining possession of a soccer ball. L /Cpl. Kidd, giving demonstrations of pugilism to members of a civilian establishment and being interrupted by an overkeen participant planting his size 12 on L/Cpl. Kidd's jaw. Tpr. Bolton-Smith on attempting to prove that a 34-year old is just as capable on a P.J.I course as the rest.

STRIKE FORCE SAGA

Early January of this year saw the inception of what has become one of the most dreadful fighting units in the Rhodesian Army. Led by Major George Walsh, an intrepid band of steely-eyed Q.M soldiers was briefed to engage with the enemy under the nom de plume of STRIKE FORCE.

With the initial briefing over, things moved with lightening speed, the whole of the R.L.I (Rear) being mobilised to assist in the protection and clandestine role of the new unit. Previously unheard of characters emerged from gloomy places or were dug up from under rocks, ration-boxes and old radios to swell the numbers. People like the R.Q.M.S and R.S.O were seen furtively cleaning and sharpening rusty bayonets and practising holding them tightly between teeth; the doctors became adept at the quick draw, using low-slung revolvers of dubious calibre (Doctor Webster, the man with no name, has been clenching cigars in his teeth); the M.T.O, apart from his daily truck-breaking session, could be found on the range desperately trying to improve his woefully low standard of marksmanship; in short, the cogs began to turn.

Before the unit was deployed, whole days were spent in training the men to the peak of battle perfection. Time and time again rations were loaded and unloaded, until it became automatic. Stores were left unattended so that the art of 'borrowing' could be developed. Tyres were inflated and deflated until the wheel repair was second nature. The call '99 this is 0' could be heard, morning, noon and night just so that there would be no mistake. Tempers and garments frayed readily in the process but were accepted as inevitable casualties... God it was hard.

Eventually all was ready, vehicles packed, men and equipment packed aboard, the tension as palpable as ice until the CO, standing erect in his staff car with binoculars glued to his eyes, signalled to the column to depart with his historic emotion-charged, never-to-be-forgotten quote 'Send it', now immortalised in the Latin phrase 'Mittat id'.

This inspired call to arms did not go unheeded - every vehicle embarked upon the journey which ended when the first destination was reached. Here was trouble!

With little delay Maj. Walsh embarked upon a recce in a helicopter to stir up trouble and was rewarded when, by exposing parts of himself as bait, he drew enemy fire. So quick was his reply, so effective his training, that he was able to hurl back four toilet rolls, two H-packs and a packet of partly

eaten dog-biscuits before the aircraft landed. By the time the reaction stick of Commandos (the only weak link in an otherwise solid chain) had arrived it was virtually all over, the C.T's having fled in the face of such a furious attack

This initial success boded well for the future and this was amply borne out when the I.O arrived, just one week after everyone else. He claimed to have been indisposed with family matters but reliable intelligence indicates that he had forgotten where to go. However, things were moving quickly, particularly the C.T's, and the Q.M strike force was hard pressed to keep up. It was now that the training came into its own. Smooth ration resupply, lots of toilet paper, plenty of signals, all these things played their part in the slog against the enemy.

The clandestine disguise adopted by Strike Force was never better demonstrated than one evening when various members sidled into a local club for an evening and one elderly lady was heard to remark, 'Oh, those must be the H.Q wankers!'. Hearing that, Maj. Walsh knew that all was well - the cover was effective.

Unfortunately the effectiveness of Strike Force has been seriously impaired by the necessary inclusion of field soldiers for odd tasks in the bush such as patrolling, sweeping, fireforce and other mundane work. This has however, provided moments of light relief. For instance, an R.A.R callsign was contacted at extreme range by a group of Intaf details who had been in the process of recovering a bogged-down vehicle. They enthusiastically fired off one round before bombshelling and such is their skill that they have not been heard of since.

Since the initial deployment there has been much moving around and this has not been without its hardships. At one stage the main body was separated from the Tac H.Q for three days because of a swollen river. This meant that there was not a single cold drink to be had at Tac H.Q that whole time. Again training played its part, enabling the whole, horrifying ordeal to be shrugged off with a light laugh. Even deployments were only marginally affected by it, a mere platoon of men being kept on standby to supply the necessary muscle power to keep the hand-driven cooler in operation.

This then is the ongoing saga of Strike Force, a force in the great tradition and not one to be trifled with. Remember this when next there is a problem in your area and sleep soundly in your bed, knowing you are safe.

'Just gonk this lekker lingo as tuned by the "Saintly" owens'.

An article written by Keith Simpson and published in 'The Rhodesia Herald'.

“Tune me a glide to burg... I wanna catch a graze ek sê.” Swahili or sanskrit? Neither.

The situation is really quite simple, you silly old toppie. You’ve just heard your first mouthful of modern Rhodesian military slang, Rhodesian Light Infantry style.

As a civvy motorist you’ve been waved down by a troopy back from the bush (gangen) who’s looking for a lift (glide) to town (burg) so he can have a bite to eat (graze).

ACKNOWLEDGED

And the toppie bit? If that’s what our troopy’s thinking you may as well hang up your topi and quietly fade. You’re past it, over the hill, too long in the tooth. Over 30 anyway.

The acknowledged masters are the men of the Rhodesian Light infantry, RLI or The Saints, the nickname they give themselves. Two-way radio conversations between RLI troopies are said at times to be totally incomprehensible, to an outsider.

Among themselves the troopies often refer to one another as owens.

Having at least a slight smattering of the lingo can be helpful to civvies... decidedly so if you find yourself face to face with a tough-looking youngster in a bar who’s telling you not to give him a ‘buzz’.

The remark has nothing to do with telephones. You’ve just been warned you’d better not give him any trouble. The same youngster telling his owen: “We’ll flatten (alternatives: slay or kill) this chibuli and pull” sounds even more alarming, but isn’t. He’s merely suggesting it’s time everybody swallowed their beer (chibuli) and left.

The troopy who announces “let’s fade this possey or loc (position)” - terms heard equally frequently in combat situations - is saying the same thing.

Before tuning his glide to burg our troopy first scaled (dressed) himself in best clobber (clothes).

If he returns declaring happily he’s had a ‘lekker hooli’ he’s had a good time. Hooli, it seems, is a corruption of hooliganism stripped of its more destructive connotations.

INEBRIATION

If he then adds he's a bit "babalas", he's in a state of inebriation ranging from merry to motherless... in which case he also is likely to announce he's off to "catch a gonk" - he's tired and wants to go to bed.

Not that "gonk" necessarily has to mean sleep. Confusingly, it can also mean our troopy is about to take a look at something.

The owen, next morning, who recalls seeing our troopy in the company of a "lekker chick" is naturally paying him a compliment on his choice of female companion.

Anyone asking him: "Who was that grimmy I saw you with last night," however, isn't being in the least bit complimentary. His chick has been rated "far from lekker".

Troopies in the gangen who are told to "hit out to the gomos" are being ordered to climb a hill, presumably in search of "floppies".

Floppies? Terrorists, ters or CT's (Communist terrorists) because of a noted tendency to flop down when shot.

The RLI driver who says "I creamed into this guy and bent my cab" to explain a broken arm, is telling you he's been in a road accident, which probably earned him a "rev" (dressing down) from the CO.

The troopy who explains a similar injury with "I was grazed by a flatdog", means he was attacked by a crocodile. An alternative for crocodile of uncertain origin is "mobile handbag".

RLI Administration Officer Captain Colin Dace keeps an ever-open ear for slang terms and notes that the origin of many of them is Afrikaans.

Ek sê. which rounds off almost every exchange between troopies, is the familiar Afrikaans "I say".

"But, it's hard keeping tack", admits Captain Dace. "Every time the men go out into the bush they seem to come back with something new".

RLI soldiers were skates. Fighting, drinking and whoring were integral to the make-up of a troopie. It goes without saying that the type of woman attracted to an RLI soldier was in the main not top-drawer. The various commandos had collected a camp following of some of these women who themselves needed to be rough and tough.

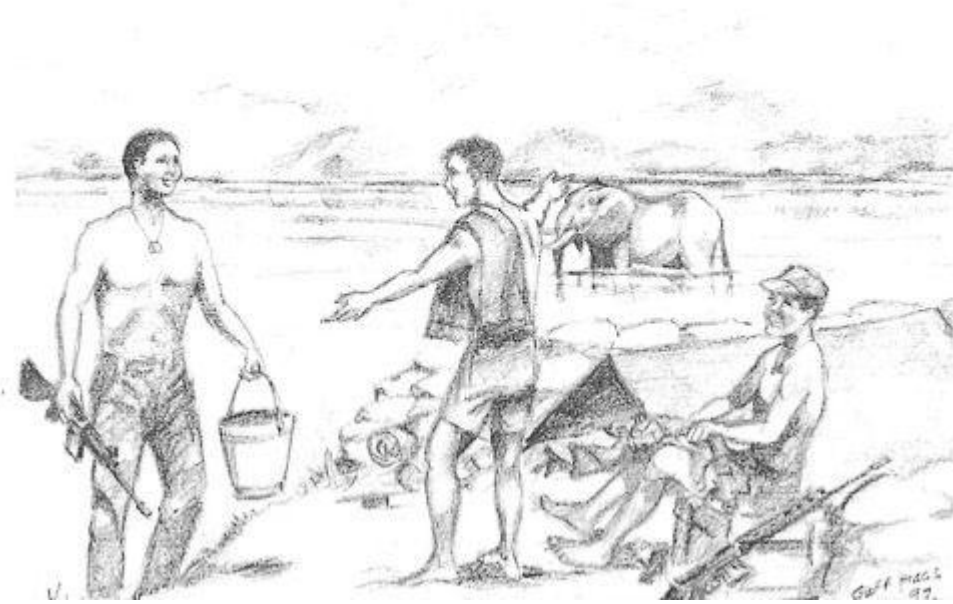
3 Commando had a faithful band of half a dozen wenches who seemed to emerge at the faintest whiff of testosterone. Some had built up such

reputations for lascivious shenanigans that they'd ultimately been banned from entering the barracks. Undeterred, they would take to prowling outside the perimeter fence in search of soldiers who happened to be at hand on the other side of the fence. Spotting a troopie, they'd whistle to him, and then dropping their knickers and hitching up their skirts, they'd back up to the wire mesh, nuzzling their bare backsides against the wire mesh. The troopie would then do his business before returning to his guard duties.

The most enduring of these creatures was a woman known only as 'Horse Face' who finally ended up living in the barracks. Apparently she was homeless and gratefully accepted the attic in the commando block as her home. She would be fed scraps from the canteen through the trapdoor by base personnel during the bush trips. Her duties would begin in earnest when the troops arrived back on R and R. She would be dragged down from her hideout and passed along from barrack room to barrack room.

I remember once walking down the corridor to my room with the sounds of Blondie's 'Denis' blasting out on volume ten from Charlie Warren's room. (He'd play it non-stop for hours at a time.) I noticed a queue of soldiers outside Pete Garnett's room. They were patiently smoking and reading magazines. Curious, I peered inside through the open doorway. I was met by the unpleasant sight of a trooper's bare backside grinding away. Horse Face, her hair greasy and matted, was lying underneath, nonchalantly munching a packet of cheese and onion crisps. The acrid smell of stale sweat and semen was overpowering and I hurriedly withdrew.

To mutters of "Hey, get to the back of the queue," I left the troopies to it and made my way to Warren's room, tacking my clipboard under my arm. (I always carried a clipboard around the barracks - everyone assumed I was on an important administrative task)



CHAPTER 28

Along the Zambesi - Autumn 1978

Excerpts from a letter to my fiancée, dated 20th April 1978.

I

It is 0530hrs. and I am sitting in my bivvy. It rained all the way up and hasn't stopped drizzling since we got here. As soon as we arrived I put up my tent and then we had to dig trenches (fun fun)... We have spent all day learning how to canoe and have been doing a lot of paddling. Tonight we are going on an exercise using the damn things... My 'house' really isn't so bad - at least it doesn't leak. I have my stretcher, my radio and my brandy, so I'm reasonably comfortable... Even at nights we aren't free. Tomorrow night we are doing a twelve kilometre walk through the bush... Last night two hyenas prowled around my tent, only five metres away from me... Will continue later as we have to prepare for this exercise... It is 2300hrs. and we have just got back. On the way to the lake (Kariba) we passed a herd of elephant next to the road. Later on we could hear them close by tearing down trees. One poor canoeist nearly paddled over a hippo, getting the shock of his life in the process... On the way back we saw a lioness with her cubs and just outside camp a bushbuck, some hyenas and a jackal... Sounds like we're on a regular safari doesn't it?

The Deka River flows into the Zambesi River a few miles upstream from the headwaters of Lake Kariba. There is a fishing resort of the same name at its mouth, which in peacetime was a popular vacation haunt. But in 1978 the only people who went there were soldiers and policemen.

The banks of the Zambesi itself are rich and lushly vegetated, and massive mahogany trees are a feature at the water's edge. But less than two kilometres inland, the bush is dry and arid, and the arable land has been

taken over by encroaching Kalahari bush. The acacias and mimosa thorns provide little shade, and the earth is hot and lifeless.

With us at Deka was a Special Air Service troop. They were highly professional. Their camp bristled with a necklace of mortar positions and anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Most of the weapons they used had been captured from the guerrillas. We envied them their military organisation for ours seemed cumbersome by comparison.

We were told we would be jointly undertaking ops inside Zambia, on the north bank of the Zambesi River. We were to seek out ZIPRA guerrillas who were readying to infiltrate Rhodesia.

‘Fuck this,’ said Harry Botes when he heard the news, ‘we should have stayed on fireforce.’

‘Ja,’ agreed Mesham, ‘looks like we’re gonna end up trudging for miles in Zambia.’

He was interrupted by Colour Sergeant Norman.

‘Stop fucking yakking and get on with those bunkers.’

We got back to excavating the hateful bunkers and shell scrapes.

‘I seem to have spent my whole life in this poxy army digging bloody bunkers,’ complained Hooley, spitting on his hands.

‘At least now you can return to Pommyland as a qualified coal-miner,’ chuckled Botes.

‘Yeah, but what really pisses me off is that as soon as we finish one lot, we have to move somewhere else and start all over again.’

‘Couldn’t agree more,’ said Mesham. “Typical fucking army”

It took an awful lot of sandbags to make one bunker. While picking one up one morning, I was stung on the top of a finger by a scorpion. I yelled out in pain and anger as the little sand-coloured demon scuffled away to safety. The agony was immediate, and I could feel the poison coursing up my arm like some kind of boiling liquid, I was terrified.

‘Here, let’s get him to the Doc’ I heard someone say through a haze of pain.

When the poison reached the glands in my armpit I felt they were about to burst. Feeling as I was going to faint, I started to topple. But hands grabbed me and helped me to the medic’s tent. Unfortunately he was a new arrival.

‘What seems to be the problem?’ he asked.

‘He’s been zapped on the finger by a scorpion,’ explained Hooley.

The Doc took my finger and inspected it without much interest.

It must have seemed of insignificant medical interest to him because he merely told me to sit down while he found me a couple of Propon capsules to swallow before I went off again.

‘Hell,’ I complained indignantly, ‘two Propon will do fuck all, Doc’ I was quite right. They had no effect at all on the pain.

Shortly afterwards I returned to his tent and almost begged him for something stronger. Grudgingly he gave me two more Propon, which also did nothing.

Finally my vision blurred, my knees gave way and I collapsed. It felt as if red-hot pokers were being rammed into my armpit, and I was almost crying with the excruciating pain.

‘For Christ’s sake, Doc, can’t you see he’s in bloody agony?’ somebody said.

The medic was unsure of himself and of what to do, but eventually he agreed to give me a shot of Sosegon.

But even this did little to control the screaming pain, and finally he began to get worried and rushed over to the Special Air Service camp to get their doctor. When the SAS doc arrived he took only one look and gave me a shot of morphine. He told me to lie on my back and suspended my arm from the roof by a sling, and two hours after that he gave me a second morphine shot.

As the pain began to diminish I fell into a long and dreamy half-sleep.

I regained consciousness a few hours later feeling strange. My arm, still suspended, felt as if it was about to gently float away. The pain was still there, but it had ceased to bother me and I felt strangely content. After that I was put back on Propon, which now proved capable of maintaining my pain-filled euphoria.

Eventually the nightmare finally came to an end - after two dreamy days of cruising gently around the camp on light duties.

The days were hot and boring and we spent most of our time trying to avoid the CSM - a man one could always rely on to find tasks for idle hands.

We watched as others were boated across the great river to Zambia for their patrols, and we hoped our turn would soon come. Meanwhile, we continued to fill endless sandbags and dig more bunkers.

When the Special Air Services offered to teach us how to operate their captured Soviet anti-aircraft guns we jumped at the opportunity. Unfortunately though, we weren't allowed to fire them as this would have made the enemy aware of our presence.

Finally came the time when Colour Sergeant Coleman told us we were off to Zambia. His stick and mine were to amalgamate under his command.

I groaned as he handed me an anti-tank rocket launcher.

'But, colour, what do we need this for? There aren't any tanks over there.'

It was unnecessary weight and I knew the chances of our using it were minimal.

'You betcha ass there are tanks over there. I want you to carry it 'cos I reckon you're the best qualified to fire it,' he lied. To humour me he added, 'Don't worry I'll hand the rockets out to the men.'

'Thanks for nothing,' I replied sourly.

We assembled at the jetty and clambered aboard the police launches which would transport us downstream and across the river to our jump-off point in Zambia. We were all heavily laden but Botes, who was humping the bulky TR48 radio, was carrying the most.

Serve the bastard right, I thought in satisfaction. That should teach him for snivelling off on a three-month signals' course.

The boats were powered by massive Hamilton jet engines, and in a disappointingly short time the exhilaration of crossing the mighty Zambesi River was over, and we were put ashore in Zambia.

'Those boat boys have a real cuff, don't they?' Craig Bone said enviously. 'The only time they walk is when they go to the shithouse!'

The climb up the great cliffs of the gorge which lay ahead of us looked ominous to say the least.

'No ways,' said, Botes shaking his head, 'I'm not gonna make it.'

Nevertheless, three hours later he collapsed breathlessly at the top, along with the rest of us.

The surrounding bush was beautiful, and signs indicated that game was abundant. Intelligence had said there were plenty of indications the guerrillas were heading down to the river from inland Zambia, as their first step to infiltrating Rhodesia. But we searched for ten days and found nothing but game trails.

‘Our bright-eyed Int boys strike again,’ complained Botes. ‘When it’s over I think

I’ll go and do a university thesis on Zambian game trails.’

I watched Botes tap away on his Morse sender. The sitreps had become boring. They were always the same.

‘November Tango Romeo ...Nothing to report.’

Most of us were struck down by a vicious strain of diarrhoea while we were there. We must have picked it up from the drinking water. It attacked us without warning when we least expected it, and it was utterly relentless.

I felt the pangs of an attack starting one night as I lay in my sleeping-bag, and knowing I didn’t have long, I scrambled frantically to extricate myself. Moments later I stumbled past the sentry into the privacy of the bush that surrounded our position. But in undressing, I managed only to drag one arm from the sleeve of my jump-suit before my bowels exploded in a loose fury.

My immediate reaction was shame and disgust at myself, but I had no option but to resign myself to the situation. I could do nothing but squat there and let nature take its course. There was no water with which to wash and my tissue paper was long since finished. When it was over - I knew quite well that it was only a temporary respite - all I could do was clean myself with leaves as best I could, and return to my sleeping-bag.

Happily for all of us, I was by no means the only one affected and we soon got used to the collective foul smells of our bodies. It was only when we returned to base in Rhodesia that we realised how filthy we had become.

‘Christ, have you buggers been swimming in a septic tank?’ Colour Sergeant Norman asked wrinkling his nose.

He immediately ordered us to the showers.

Excerpts from letters to my fiancée...

11th May 1978... I have just got back from ten days of ambushing in Zambia... We got back at about 1700hrs. this evening and to my delight there was a parcel and three letters... We have moved camp yet again. We are now in an old South African Police base, complete with barrack rooms and showers. We are still at Deka though and I have a feeling that we’re here until the end of the bush trip, which I think will be ‘til the beginning of June... I didn’t enjoy Zambia much. We were carrying eight water bottles

and eight day's food as well as landmines. Hell, they were heavy. It took us over three hours to get on to the Barotse Plains. I haven't been so stuffed for a long time. We didn't see any action though... 11 Troop is really pathetic at the moment. I have never seen such a useless bunch of soldiers and I am petrified to work with them. The standards have gone up the creek. We have just got a new major, so maybe he'll put things right... I have just realised the Zambesi Valley is one of the most beautiful places on earth.

14th May 1978... It is ten past four in the morning and I write this letter while I am on radio watch until 0500hrs... It is freezing at the moment. Yesterday we had shooting practice. I also had to fire the 3.5 rocket launcher which is a big bazooka-like affair. The bloody tiling kicked back something awful and the sights smacked me on my eye and cheekbone. All the hair on my arms was burnt off and my right eyebrow is singed. I far prefer to fire the tens' RPGs which are much lighter and less bulky... A chap in 12 Troop brewed some kachasu. Hell, it was potent! He had put together two full drums made from marula berries and left the vile liquid fermenting for about two weeks. Three glasses were enough to put a man on his back. Harry Botes says that when he stood up he felt as if the ground was calling him. It is now five to five and my relief should be arriving at any minute, so I will try and catch some sleep in the next hour... Afternoon. I have been sorting out my pack which is extremely heavy. My stick will be penetrating about thirty kays into Zambia and I am a bit scared.

We had only been back in camp a day or two when we were told we were to return to Zambia.

'Wot the fuck for?' Hooley asked Colour Sergeant Norman. 'I bet the nearest gooks are in Lusaka.'

'They're not,' replied the colour. 'Sergeant Abbott's stick had a contact this morning and drilled a couple. They're worried about a counterattack, so you brave okses are going in to reinforce them. This time you're being taken by chopper right to the OP.'

His smirk confirmed that he was telling the truth, and we all heaved sighs of relief. No walking! That our cover might be blown by using the choppers didn't matter a damn to us. And anyway, what the hell? The gooks would now obviously be aware of Abbott's position.

We repacked our Bergens, which we had hardly touched since our return from the previous patrol, and were soon airborne - on our way to relieve the beleaguered Sergeant Abbott.

Sergeant Abbott, however, wasn't acting at all as if he was beleaguered, as he strolled casually on to the LZ near his OP and watched approvingly as we leaped off the chopper, weapons at the ready, and took up tactical positions.

'What're you lads doing?' asked Sarge Abbott, seemingly perplexed. 'Nothing's happened here for the last two days.'

'We heard you were under attack,' said Colour Sergeant Coleman, still clutching his rifle in readiness.

"We were, but they've all gom.'

I stripped off my webbing and settled down in the shelter of a cluster of boulders to brew up some tea while Sarge Abbott related what had happened.

The man on duty at the OP had spotted a group of ZIPRA guerrillas patrolling at the foot of the hill, so Sergeant Abbott took his stick down the slope to engage them, leaving 'Quick Draw' (as he was later known) McCabe on the summit to guard their equipment.

Unknown to Abbott, two guerrillas had been sent to reconnoitre the top of the hill... and they stumbled on 'Quick Draw' who promptly shot them both dead from point blank range.

Meanwhile the ZIPRA patrol being stalked by Sarge Abbott fled.

However ZIPRA had been operating in strength in the area, so the 14 Troop men had been justified in expecting some sort of retaliation.

'What's that horrible smell, Abbott?' Sarge Coom asked. 'You farted again I bet.'

'That's our Sid.'

'Who?'

'Sid - one of our friendly dead gooks. Never argues you know'

Coom wrinkled his nose in disgust.

'Can't you move the bastard? He bloody stinks.'

'Wot for? It's not our country' replied Sergeant Abbott with complete disinterest.

The dead guerrillas lay a mere twenty metres away from our position and occasionally, depending on the wind direction and strength, a vile stench blanketed our rocky haven.

We waited in vain for the enemy to return, spending the day playing 'Battieships' and 'Noughts and Crosses'.

But ZIPRA were plainly too frightened (or not bothered) to come and seek us out.

I had managed to become the guardian of the late Sid's AK rifle and I spent many hours stripping and assembling it.

'D'you reckon I could pinch this?,' I asked Sarge Abbott.

'I don't see why not,' replied the sergeant, 'but you'll never get it past the officers.'

I broke the weapon down into its smallest components and concealed the parts in my Bergen.

Sid's corpse began to deteriorate rapidly in the tropical sun. The stench became even more obnoxious and unbearable, and soon the vultures came soaring over our heads.

Hooley moaned, 'For fuck's sake, sarge, those vultures are going to compromise our position.'

'Well, you go and bury the sod,' replied Sergeant Abbott who was engrossed in saving a destroyer, 'cos I'm bloody not.'

As I continued stripping down the AK, one of the troopers who was feeling bored decided to hack off Sid's ears as souvenirs. Hanging them on a nearby bush to dry he said, 'I'm gonna give them to my chick as a present.'

'Huh - one of the last great romantics,' grunted Sergeant Coom. 'Why don't you take off his head as well, then you might even get a fuck out of her?'

I felt nauseous at this suggestion, for Sid's head was no longer recognisable as a human cranium. The maggots were everywhere, the ears rescued only in the nick of time. It was, I thought, time for a joint.

I had managed to bring a small quantity of grass with me and spent many happy hours whilst on OP duty smoking the weed. Even so, Sid managed to put a damper on my enjoyment when his disgusting smell wafted over to where I sat, and I thanked God the other gook was further down the slope and so out of 'noseshot'.

But in spite of the stench, Sid remained unburied.

After a week we were recalled. By then our position was hopelessly compromised and the whole exercise had become a waste of time.

Colour Norman met us at the choppers as we arrived back at base.

‘Before you go anywhere,’ he said to me, I want those AKs.’

‘Sure, colour,’ I lied, digging out the parts of Sid’s AK, ‘I was just about to give you one.’

How on earth had he known... or had he just guessed?



CHAPTER 29

Mtoko – June 1978

Excerpts from letters to my fiancée written June/July, 1978.

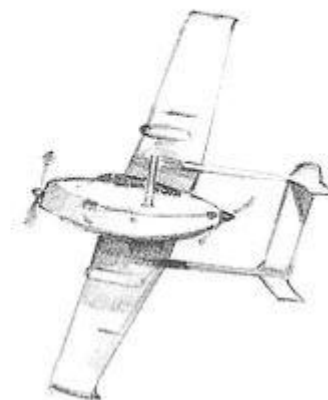
18th June 1978... I am sorry I have not written sooner. I have started to write a few letters, but by the time I got back to them they were out of date. We are very busy here and have been on callouts every day... Our troop had its first contact of the trip yesterday and we killed three terrors, captured two and killed two females who were running with them. Would you believe the contact was in Mazoe? The chopper pilot said that if we had been at the scene of the contact for another twenty minutes, we would have had to spend the night in Salisbury due to fading light. I nearly cried with frustration... I have been getting stoned out of my head here at nights to try and make me forget where I am... It has been bitterly cold here but it seems to be improving slightly. The problem is waking up in the mornings, as we have to be out of bed by 0530hrs. when it is still pitch black and freezing... I was going to speak on that 'Contact' radio programme the other day, but was called out just as I was about to say my bit. Maybe it was just as well.

23rd June... We have been out all day in the Madziwa area and we jumped in by parachute... I hope you have recovered from your flu. We are still unbeaten at soccer. Two days ago we beat the coloureds from the Protection Unit 3 - 2. The first day we beat them 4 - 1. We have also played the blacks from the Rhodesian African Rifles, beating them 3 - 1... Today the RLI Rhodesians are playing the RLI 'foreigners' and I believe we will win... Goss and I have devised a rugby game which is played using a board and cards. I played Goss after supper and there was a minute of the game to go with the score 23 - 18 in my favour. Just before the 'whistle' he scored a try which he converted. He was so excited that he jumped up and down cheering, and knocked over the table flooding the 'pitch' with beer. We had

a big argument as I said there were still a few seconds of the game left to go and, as he had vandalised the pitch, the result would not count... Goss and Charlie were in a contact the other day and were lucky to get back as they came close to being shot up... I was afraid of the jump yesterday as there was a howling gale, but I landed okay apart from a sore elbow... We have a super little pub here and every night Goss and I do a 'cabaret' there. I play the guitar while Goss takes the limelight. His favourites are 'Rocky Horror', 'Moonlighting' and his own hilarious version of 'An English Country Garden'... The new OC, Major Snelgar, has also done a few turns and proved himself a natural actor - perhaps that's why he is a major. The other night he did a twittly little bird skit and had us in stitches!... Tonight after the soccer match we are having a folk evening and Lieutenant Greenhalgh, Lorne Knox and I will be playing our guitars. The losers of the match will have to buy four crates of beer, so I think I'll be drinking free again!.. I am thinking about patenting the rugby game. It is popular with everyone, even the officers. Who knows - I might even be able to make a bit of money out of it.

27th June 1978... Guess what? Our marriage has been approved by some colonel or other and the signal granting me permission to marry you wished us a long and happy marriage. Quite a nice touch for the army... We watched a film last night and it was such a load of rubbish I can't even remember what it was called. We played soccer against the Air Force yesterday and beat them 3 - 2, which I thought was a good effort on our part as they had a few Callies' players in their side. I played goalie for the first time. They had to buy two crates of beer for us and our team captain, Lieutenant Carloni, says we'll put four crates on the game next week. He is a shrewd negotiator when it comes to beer... We are off to the border near Nyamapanda tomorrow to take part in a large operation, so I don't know when we will be back... All the 156 intake national servicemen will be demobbed in three days' time, so they are trying their damndest to avoid action. I don't blame them, though I have a fine time tormenting them, especially Botes and Mesham. I keep telling them they will be going out in my stick and I will put them on cave clearing. They invariably go quite pale.

30th June... The 156 intake national servicemen left for Salisbury today and I felt really depressed staying here... At the moment I am on radio watch which I enjoy because it gives me a chance to write to you without distraction. We have even brought a TV along with us and we finally managed to get it working today. On top of that one of the signallers has tuned the big TR48 set in to Radio 5 in South Africa. 3rd July 1978... It gets very depressing here sometimes and we get bored continually playing cards. We sometimes have lectures but they are also boring. This afternoon we are going to do a 'fun jump' from 3500 feet, which will be a record height for us.... There was a callout the other day and some of the blokes had a contact about sixteen kays north of Borrowdale. Do you know they spent the night in Salisbury? I was furious because I just missed going... Tomorrow is 4th July and Hugh McCall and the other Yanks are celebrating. They are trying to organise a special American dinner for us tonight... My letter has just been interrupted by another callout, but luckily nothing came of it... There is a slight chance that I might be coming back for two days to take my military driving licence. But don't be too hopeful.



CHAPTER 30

Mount Darwin – July 1978

T

he days of routine patrolling were fast coming to an end. Guerrilla pressure was increasing at an alarming rate and it was decided that half of 3 Commando would remain on fireforce duties at Mtoko, while the rest would deploy as a fireforce from Mount Darwin.

The commandos were constantly required for fireforce reaction and it became increasingly difficult to cope with the large volume of callouts. The greatest restraining factor was the shortage of helicopters. With United Nations sanctions biting harder all the time, especially in the military equipment field, they were all but irreplaceable, and when one was shot down it dealt the country a severe blow.

Tactically, the splitting of a commando was undesirable for it left no reserves if a large-scale action developed. But unfortunately there was no other option open.

11 and 14 Troops were nominated to go to Mount Darwin and we groaned when we heard that Commando Sergeant Major Reed was coming with us... Would we ever get away from sergeant majors?

Outside the infrastructure of the commando however, he proved himself a likeable man. Although a strict disciplinarian, the need for him to shout and scream at the men diminished when he only had two troops to look after.

He was not required to accompany us on callouts, for a CSM's job was to stay at base to organise the day-to-day running of things. But he insisted on joining the action, and because he had not seen combat for a long time, he volunteered to serve as an ordinary rifleman in one of the sticks until he had regained enough experience to lead his own.

He rotated amongst the sticks in order to study the different methods of leadership and I admired him greatly for this honest and forthright

approach. I was privileged to have him serve under me in my stick, and it very soon became apparent that despite the lack of combat practice, he had lost none of his old bush skills.

His leadership was of the highest order, and when in time he took command of his own stick, his control of a sweep line was a pleasure to watch.

Later that year Sergeant Major Reed left the commando on appointment as the Regimental Sergeant Major. We were sorry to see him go.

Shortly after arriving at Mount Darwin I had the narrowest escape of my career as a soldier.

We had been engaged in a gruelling contact in the Mvuradona Mountains, on the escarpment that sweeps down to the Zambesi Valley. It was about 1600hrs. and we were doing a final sweep of the area before uplift by helicopter. It had been a successful encounter in which we had accounted for twelve guerrillas. Neat and clinical.

My stick was to the right of Charlie Norris' as we swept up a grassy slope scattered with occasional bushes and msasa trees.

For some peculiar reason I was convinced the surviving guerrillas had already fled. As a consequence, I was not as alert as I should have been, and my mind was wandering. I was in a sort of a daydream, and although my eyes were searching the bush ahead as usual, I was not really looking.

Then suddenly my reverie was shattered by a burst of gunfire coming from behind me.

The bullets seemed to pass directly between my legs and I dived to the ground in panic.

Oh Jesus, my brain raced, they're shooting at us from the rear!

I felt so vulnerable. I was sure the next burst would hit me. I lay there, waiting helplessly for the coup de grâce.

But nothing happened.

I lifted my head and peered warily over my shoulder, and was astonished to see Charlie standing next to me.

'What's up, Chris?' he asked. 'Didn't you see that gook?' He pointed to a bush less than two metres to my front.

Bemused by what had happened, I looked where he indicated, and stiffened with horror... A dead guerrilla was slumped over an AK - and it

was pointing directly at me.

'I scheme you're lucky,' said Charlie. 'I think the bastard was going to shoot you before you took another step.'

The truth of his words hit me like a sledgehammer right between the eyes. There was nothing I could say. Although grateful I was still alive, I was overwhelmed by shame and guilt.

If Charlie hadn't been close by and keeping his eyes open, I would have been dead... and it would have been my own stupid fault. Worse than that, my carelessness would have caused not only my own death, but also that of the soldier next to me.

Excerpt from a letter to my fiancée dated 16th July 1978.

... The last two weeks certainly are dragging. We are still called out every day with most of the contacts in the Mvuradonas... It is raining hard here at the moment which is unusual for this time of the year... We did another jump yesterday, which brings my total to forty-one. It never seems to stop... I am getting tired of the army. Every day they change us from chopper role to para role and back again, and the officers always switch the sticks around. It gets very aggravating and at times we don't know whether we are coming or going.

It was a difficult tour. Because there were so few of us, we had little if any respite from the waves of daily callouts. Often after the conclusion of a contact, we would immediately be ferried to a new sighting, sometimes a hundred or so kilometres away from the first, and the whole nerve-racking business would begin again.

At night we fell on our stretchers completely exhausted, too tired to party - too weary even to write letters.

One of the American Vietnam vets brought a Doors tape to the barrack room and the melancholy, almost death-laden voice of Jim Morrison saddened my already numb and exhausted mind.

We lost track of the kill rate as the days wore on.

None of us really cared any more.

Did scores matter anyway?

The enemy had an inexhaustible supply of replacements, no matter how many we killed.

The Rhodesian Light Infantry, and 3 Commando in particular, was made up of a great diversity of individuals of all kinds of nationalities. With such conflicting backgrounds and cultures, they were sometimes so opposingly different that I still marvel at the way they fought so well together. In fact how they were forged into such a cohesive, aggressive unit has remained something of a mystery to me.

3 Commando was a weird kind of brotherhood. Apart from the French Foreign Legion I find it hard to believe there was another unit like it.

Craig Bone was one of the most unusual individuals in the commando.

Craig was the epitome of a successful, young Rhodesian sportsman at school, where he played 1st XV rugby and broke numerous Rhodesian track records. Academically, he was brilliant too, with a near-genius level IQ.

Yet he expected public accolades neither on the sports field nor in the classroom. He was just 'good'. After leaving school he signed on as a regular in the British South Africa Police, forsaking the opportunity of a lucrative and no doubt sedate future.

As a policeman he proved himself, as always, well above average. But his agile, restless mind soon began looking for a new form of stimulation and he took dis-charge (under irregular circumstances), and promptly signed on for three years in 3 Commando.

Craig Bone was assigned to 11 Troop and was immediately given an MAG by Colour Sergeant Coleman. Many gunners were short and stocky, but this was not always the rule and Craig's powerful athletic physique made him an ideal candidate.

He was in fact one of the few gunners able to fire a MAG from the shoulder position. I tried this once or twice, when it was absolutely necessary and only in extreme circumstances, but Bone did it all the time and was incredibly accurate.

Bone had the bad luck to be wounded after only a few months in the commando, while operating with John Coleman's stick in Moçambique. Their position became compromised and they found themselves surrounded by an entire company of FRELIMO soldiers. But in spite of their overwhelming superiority FRELIMO initially preferred to sit well back in safety and mortar the Rhodesians.

Unfortunately, on this occasion their mortar fire was devastatingly accurate and Colour Sergeant Coleman counted himself lucky his stick escaped with only three wounded. The most badly wounded was Bone. His

legs were ripped apart by shrapnel and he was fortunate not to lose them. Nevertheless, after making a remarkable recovery, he was soon back with the troop.

It was during sick leave that he took up painting. It had been an old hobby of his, and understandably his choice of subject now was military. All of us were astounded at his excellent style and technique which were both evocative and accurate. In fact, Major Bruce Snelgar was so impressed that he asked Craig to paint a fireforce scene, to take pride of place in the commando pub.

It was his first commission, and since that day he has never looked back. Today in another era, Craig Bone is a noted artist and sells his paintings in Europe, the United States and the rest of the world.



CHAPTER 31

Sengwe – August 1978

W

e were off to the Lowveld again and not very happy about it either.

Botes and Mesham were back in the commando on territorial call-up. The battalion had only just started calling up ex-members, as it made more sense for them to serve in the RLI rather than as strangers in a territorial outfit.

Corporal Pudding let it slip we were going to a place near the Limpopo River, where the borders of Rhodesia, South Africa and Moçambique meet. Somewhere called Grootvlei. It wasn't even marked on the map.

'Ah, but corp,' Botes groaned to me, 'that's fuckin' miles from Salisbury, and all the birds will miss me. We must think about the civvies' morale as well, you know'

In spite of not having a military driving licence I was driving a truck. There were no licensed drivers in the troop, and since someone had to drive the troop vehicles the CSM had often turned a blind eye and used me as a driver. The truth was the commando couldn't spare desperately needed fighting soldiers for driving courses.

I drove the whole of that day until late at night, when we eventually arrived at Buffalo Range where we were to be accommodated.

At 0500hrs the next morning the convoy got back on the road. There were eight troop-carriers, the ammo truck, the CQ truck, the canteen vehicles, various other trucks, and masses of trailers carrying diesel, fuel, water and all the other logistics of a commando on the move to a fireforce posting.

There was no one in the passenger seat of the cab with me. That was forbidden because of the threat of landmines.

But I was exhausted, and about twenty kilometres south of Chiredzi, felt myself nodding off. The truck started to veer across the dirt road and

the troops on the back began to get worried.

‘Hey, corp, don’t go to sleep,’ complained Botes sticking his head through the top of the cab.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t,’ I retorted, and corrected the vehicle.

Nevertheless I soon felt sleep creeping over me again. Realising the danger, I immediately stopped the truck by the side of the road, and the rest of the convoy following behind automatically stopped as well. Unbuckling my seat belt, I stood up to speak through the hatch to the men on the back.

‘Doesn’t anybody want to drive this fucking thing? I think I really am going to fall asleep’.

The men looked at me with without interest. They were as tired as I was.

‘Zut, corp, we’ll wake you if you start gonking,’ Mesham said.

I shrugged resignedly and resumed driving.

I was hard-pressed to stay awake. Even chain-smoking didn’t help much, and after a while I found myself catching up with Pudding’s truck in front of me, far too close to it for safety.

Then as we approached the Lundi River I finally nodded off.

It was a strange sensation as the vehicle careered into a ditch, rumbled down a slope and ground to a halt in a cloud of dust. We were fortunate it didn’t overturn.

Everyone was suddenly awake - including me. Fortunately we were all unharmed and the vehicle was little worse for the experience.

‘For fuck’s sake, corp, you’re gonna kill us!’ Nicholson moaned.

After winching the truck from the ditch, the journey continued and now I was wide awake. The shock of the near-accident had done the trick.

We were positioned towards the rear of the convoy and I couldn’t understand why we kept stopping. At one such inexplicable halt I chatted to Pudding.

‘Aren’t you supposed to put your troops in all-round defence positions when we stop?’ asked Pudding, knowing full well that no one ever did.

I jerked a thumb at the men all fast asleep on the back of the truck.

‘They’d probably tell me to fuck off if I ordered them to,’ I retorted.

‘No discipline, that’s the trouble nowadays,’ said Pudding half-seriously.

When we arrived at our destination we were dismayed to find nothing but endless bush.

‘How can they give a place a name when it hasn’t even got a shithouse?’ Nicholson asked morosely.

We were allocated troop areas and got down to making ourselves as comfortable as possible. The likes of Pudding were all right as they could sleep on the backs of the trucks where they set up their stretchers and mosquito nets.

‘Where are the choppers?’ asked Tom Argyll suddenly. ‘I thought we were meant to be a fireforce.’

‘They’re at Malapati,’ I replied.

Malapati was a small base about twenty kilometres to the north.

‘That’s a bit bloody stupid,’ said Tom. ‘Then why are we so far away from there?’

‘The army works in mysterious ways, Tom,’ I replied, not knowing the answer either.

The bush was pleasant, and though not too thick, there was plenty of shade under which we could erect reasonably comfortable bivouacs. The major problem was ticks. Every blade of grass seemed to host hordes of the damned things.

But in most ways the camp routines were relatively untaxing, and as the guerrillas in that part of the world were remarkably elusive, most of the callouts were lemons.

My stick claimed the only kills of the ten-day trip.

There was no siren sounded for the alarm, as the din of the approaching choppers gave us ample warning.

‘Oh, fook,’ shouted an Irishman called MacWilliams, when he heard the choppers were on their way, ‘another fookin’ lemon!’

MacWilliams was my MAG gunner. He had, to say the least, led a chequered career.

Once he had been an MAG gunner in Support Commando... until a corporal charged him for some minor offence. This upset him, because he believed he was being done an injustice, and one night while the corporal was sleeping, MacWilliams struck him on the head with his MAG barrel, almost killing him.

The Support Commando major decided he didn’t need psychopaths in his unit, so MacWilliams was posted out, and somehow he ended up in 11 Troop as my machinegunner.

What had I done to deserve that? I wondered.

MacWilliams was short and stocky with rosy cherubic cheeks, and he spoke with a broad Irish accent... and initially I didn't trust him. In fact on early operations, perhaps understandably, I tended to watch my back. I don't know if he had much grey matter between his ears, but he turned out to be one of the finest MAG gunners I'd ever had.

My two riflemen were Malcolm Nicholson and Tom Argyll. A brawny Afrikaner from South Africa, Tom had served in the South African Police before joining 3 Commando. I was puzzled by his Scottish name, but evidently one of his ancestors had been a Scot - apparently not uncommon amongst Afrikaners...

I was the only born Rhodesian in the stick.

The helicopter headed west into the Sengwe Tribal Trust Land while I listened in on the headset. Everything seemed completely chaotic, which convinced me we were in for another lemon. The pilot pointed to a kraal four hundred metres to the north of us and I nodded, acknowledging that I understood this was to be our LZ.

The chopper banked sharply towards the ground, and moments later we were in cover facing the kraal. It seemed deserted.

'Stop Three ...Three Nine?' came Major Snelgar's voice over the radio.

'Stop Three... Go,' I replied.

'Check out the village to your front, and afterwards sweep east for about five hundred metres until you reach a large river line.'

'Roger... Copied.'

I picked up my orange dayglow ground-to-air signal panel, and signalled to the stick that we were going to search the huts of the village. We moved forward to clear the kraal, two men per hut. While one smashed the doors open, the other provided cover.

The village was empty.

'Stop Three... Three Nine,' it was the major in the K-car again.

'Stop Three.... Nothing in the kraal, sir,' I reported into the mouthpiece.

'Roger. There is a well-used path leading east from the kraal. Use that as your axis on your way to the river.'

The major didn't miss a trick.

We found the path and fanned into a sweep line, staying about fifteen metres apart. No signals were necessary. The men were all veterans, and

they kept their distances and their dressing as a matter of course.

The going was easy and the ground fairly open, with only occasional clumps of mopani and jesse bush.

Under one such bush, a few paces from me, I saw a shape that reminded me of a sack of maize. It looked incongruous.

I signalled, and the stick immediately crouched, weapons at the ready, eyes straining ahead.

Then the 'sack' moved and an AK appeared - almost sneakily, pointing in my direction. I also saw a pair of boots... Presumably the guerrilla had hoped I wouldn't see him.

I had no cover and felt completely vulnerable.

I lifted my rifle, took deliberate aim and fired twice.

The guerrilla shuddered and lay still.

"TAKE COVER! I shouted to the others. "THEY'RE HERE!"

As I spoke the enemy opened up on Argyle and MacWilliams to my left.

I identified the sound of an RPD machinegun amongst the enemy weapons, as Argyle rolled into cover and returned fire. MacWilliams, seemingly oblivious to the peril, crouched over his MAG and happily traded fire with fire.

Nicholson and I were too far to the right to see what was going on, and we didn't know in which direction to fire. It was like being in the audience at an extremely noisy show

Then the firing ceased abruptly.

'What's going on, Tom?' I shouted.

'A shithouse full of them were revving us from that anthill,' Argyle shouted back.

'Have they gone?'

'I think so corp.' Tom was always very, very cool. No fuss.

'Let's check it out.'

Within seconds we were at the offending anthill.

Apart from the dead RPD gunner, it was deserted, but weapons and equipment were scattered everywhere. It had been a large group, and once again I was thankful for the MAG's superior fire power, which had saved the day.

I got on the radio and reported the contact to Major Snelgar.

He ordered us to gather up the weapons and follow tracks as soon as we could. The tracks were not hard to follow. Two of the guerrillas were wounded and their blood spoor was very obvious, with dark patches in the dust and nasty, red swathes in the grass.

Nevertheless we could not hurry. We had to check out every bush that might conceal an enemy in ambush. By dusk we were at the river line, still on their tracks.

Over the radio I'd heard that all the other sticks were being uplifted and I thought we'd been forgotten. Then came the faint throb of a chopper approaching.

'Stop Three... Yellow Three... Do you read?'

'Stop Three... Go.'

'Roger... Stand by for uplift... Talk me in,' radioed the pilot.

Thank goodness - we were returning to base. They hadn't forgotten us.

We dashed for the nearest bit of open ground that could serve as an LZ.

'Yellow Three... keep coming as you are... Go left... go left... Straighten out... Roger, I am one hundred metres to your front.

'Roger... I have you visual.'

The chopper flared over the LZ, and as it landed the men of the stick grinned happily at me, I was their leader - I was looking out for them. It was an immensely gratifying feeling.

Once aboard, the chopper pilot spoke to me over the radio.

There was insufficient flying time left before dark, he said. We would have to spend the night at Mabalauta, on the banks of the Nuanetsi River. I groaned because Base Group was there. Those Base Group wallahs didn't like the commandos - and discipline was as strict as it was back in barracks.

As soon as we deplaned at Mabalauta, making the best of things I sought out the duty sergeant and asked him to provide food and accommodation for my stick.

Grudgingly he said he would organise it, and sauntered off to tell the cook there would be four extra for dinner. We soon discovered there were none of our own officers and NCOs around to tell us what to do, and the Base Group people seemed surprisingly hesitant to order us about. We suddenly felt free.

'Ah think we should ge' a crate of beers and ge' stuck in,' suggested Nicholson.

‘Not a bad idea for a fookin’ Scotsman,’ chipped in MacWilliams.

Argylle wandered off toward the canteen and returned a few minutes later with a crate of cold beers.

‘Leave it to the South Africans,’ he laughed. ‘And I can even get more if we want.’

We didn’t even bother to shower and were soon drinking beer. A couple of Base Group blokes joined us briefly, but they didn’t stay for long before going off to bed.

MacWilliams was active. In a short time he had a roaring fire going, next to which we cracked jokes and told stories. Nicholson pulled out a massive cob of dope he’d recovered from the corpse of the RPD gunner, and our eyes lit up. We smoked and drank and drank and smoked. We were content - this was what it was all about. This was happiness, and I felt a great love for my comrades.

At about midnight, however, MacWilliams decided it was time to raid the kitchens. He’d got the ‘munchies’. I knew it was a dumb move but I allowed him to carry on - I also had the ‘munchies’.

Cooking by Base Group was done in the open and the stoves were surrounded by massive deep-freezes, all padlocked.

I watched with trepidation as MacWilliams gently tested the locks. They wouldn’t open, so the mad Irishman found a crowbar and began to smash them open. The noise caused a black security guard to come and investigate. But seeing us there he wisely retreated. (I was staggered - did Base Group use servants to do the guard duties?)

Once the deep-freeze was open we peered inside.

‘Oh shit - after all that and we only get some fucking cakes,’ Argylle giggled.

Making the best of things we took as many boxes as we could and crammed them beneath the seats of the sleeping helicopter. Then after eating more than our fill until about 0200hrs., we finally dropped into drunken slumbers.

The next morning I was rudely awakened by a young signaller, shaking me by the shoulder.

‘Corporal, the major wants you and your stick fallen in on the chopper pad in five minutes.’

I was suddenly wide awake. Oh shit, now we’re for it!

Five minutes later we were dressed and paraded next to Yellow 3.

The Base Group major appeared, followed by a sergeant and two black security guards - one of whom I recognised as the one from the previous night.

The major looked sternly at me.

‘Corporal, a guard says one of your men broke into the freezers last night. I am going to ask him to identify the man responsible.’

‘Er... yes sir,’ I gulped.

I suddenly saw out of the corner of my eye that the cake boxes on the helicopter were clearly visible from where we were standing. It could surely only be a matter of time before they were seen.

The security guard came forward, his greatcoat hanging loosely about his skinny frame. This was clearly his big moment. He paused in front of each of us in turn, his beady eyes suspiciously looking us up and down.

When he stopped at MacWilliams, he looked him over briefly, then turned to the major.

‘Sah, he is the one. He broke the fridge!’ he said triumphantly.

The major took an angry breath and stepped up to MacWilliams. But before he could even open his mouth, MacWilliams embarked on the best piece of acting I have ever seen.

He exploded in seeming rage, and ignoring the slack-jawed major, jumped at the guard and grabbed him by the throat.

‘Listen, you fookin’ kaffir. If you ever accuse me of stealin’ again I’m gonna break your fookin’ black neck!’ He squeezed hard on the man’s windpipe. ‘D’you fookin’ hear me?’

‘Now, I say, steady on....’ the major said in confusion. He’d obviously never had dealings with a psychopath.

‘No, I promise you, sir. Ah’m gonna kill this bastard! Ah’m 3 Commando an’ 3 Commando don’t fookin’ steal. We only fookin’ KILL! Ge’ the picture?’

Argyll and Nicholson nodded sternly in agreement, as MacWilliams continued threatening the man with violence likely to terminate his very existence. The poor major was completely nonplussed and he eventually withdrew in disorder - clearly to save the security guard’s life.

‘Let the man go, MacWilliams.’

He turned to me.

‘I can only take your word for this, corporal - but I’ve no doubt you’ll be hearing more about it from your OC!’

He walked off in confusion as MacWilliams disdainfully released the guard, flashing me a wink at the same time.

The chopper pilot had been watching the scene in bored amusement while his technician had been trying to puzzle out what the white boxes were under the seats.

An hour later we got back to Grootvlei. Major Snelgar was there to meet us and extended his congratulations on our kills. Three hours later I was summoned by him.

‘Corporal Cocks, the Selous Scouts are at the contact scene and need you to show them the spoor. They reckon they’ll be able to follow the tracks. I suggest you get ready to stay out for at least a couple of days. A chopper will pick you up at ten.’

Oh no, I thought glumly, this sounds like really hard work

As I turned to go, the major had an afterthought.

‘By the way. Corporal Cocks, when you return, we must have a chat about some cakes they allege were stolen last night at Mabalauta.’

‘Cakes, sir?’ I tried to appear innocent.

‘I think you bloody well know what I am talking about,’ the major said. But I saw with relief that his eyes were twinkling.

‘Sir,’ I said and saluted, my face crimson.

An hour later I met up with the Scouts who were waiting for me at the previous day’s contact scene.

There were eight of them, four blacks and four whites. They were expert trackers and soon found where the guerrillas had been hiding. One had been hiding in the river bank, not three metres from where we had regrouped after the contact the previous day.

Though they were not unfriendly to me, the Scouts never seemed to speak to each other. They were really scruffy and unshaven, and wore a variety of uniforms. This apparently casual attitude, however, belied their rigid, professional dedication.

We followed the guerrillas’ tracks for three days, until they bombshelled. After that it became pointless to carry on. A chopper was called in to pick me up and I said goodbye to my new-found friends.

Back at base I found the camp had already been struck. Vehicles were formed up and the convoy was ready to go.

‘Come on, Corporal Cocks, hurry up,’ the CSM urged, ‘we’ve been hanging on for you. They’re giving us an early R and R’

Hanging on for me... The whole commando?

I needed no further urging and jumped on to the back of the nearest truck.

Somehow it didn't seem real - the commando had been waiting for me! I felt wanted and it was a very special feeling. But my pride and elation were short-lived. On the way home I began to shiver with the onset of tickbite fever.

By the time I had recovered, two weeks had passed... and my precious, long-awaited R and R was over.



CHAPTER 32

Middle Sabi – October 1978

M

y long-awaited leave was over. During this period I had got married. (Pudding had very kindly scraped together a guard of honour at the wedding in the RLI chapel. Condon was there - as drunk as a skunk and had hissed at me that I was a 'cunt', as my new wife and I blissfully walked down the aisle.) Now I was back with the commando. Our destination was Grand Reef and the lads were fairly pleased with the posting.

But as so often happens in the army our happiness turned out to be short-lived. When the convoy arrived at Grand Reef it halted near the JOC buildings instead of taking us to our usual fireforce quarters.

A colonel emerged and spoke to Major Snelgar, and they both went inside. Then Sergeant Coom, our troop commander, was summoned inside to join the discussion as well.

We sat in the vehicles outside, saying nothing and wondering what was going on. Ten minutes later Sergeant Coom rejoined us.

'Guess what, chaps,' grinned Coom with a pseudo-sadistic grin, 'we are not going on fireforce after all. They're going to send us on walkies instead.'

'Oh fuck,' groaned Hooley.

'And by the sound of it,' Coom continued relentlessly, 'it's going to be bloody long walkies.'

Coom enjoyed being the bearer of bad news. We were told to ready ourselves for a five-day patrol and we dejectedly began preparing our packs. At 1400hrs. we reassembled for the briefing. Galloway, Neave and McCall were the other stick leaders and they were just as unimpressed as I was.

'So what fookin' mad scheme are we going on now sarge?' Galloway, who had only recently won the Bronze Cross of Rhodesia, asked in his

broad Scots accent.

‘It’s not a mad scheme,’ retorted Coom. ‘The colonel has gathered up some pretty good int.’

‘But he’s a fucking territorial wanker - that 4th. Batt cunt,’ interrupted Neave. ‘What the hell does he know about good int?’

‘Yeah,’ chipped in McCall, ‘and we know him... his int is always up to shit.’

I could see that Coom agreed. But as a well-disciplined senior NCO he certainly wasn’t going to say so.

‘Why can’t his 4-RR blokes go and do it if he’s so bloody keen?’ Galloway asked, still hoping that persistence would get us out of it.

‘Because they’re all out on patrol... and besides, there aren’t enough of them anyway’ answered Sarge Coom.

‘I really don’t understand this army’ I said. ‘We’d get a hell of a lot more kills by going on fireforce.’

‘Okay, that’s enough,’ Sarge Coom said, cutting short our objections. ‘Intelligence has identified about twenty suspected terr base camps in the Maranke Tribal Trust Land. The colonel wants us to hit them simultaneously at dawn tomorrow’

‘Tomorrow!’ we chorused in unison. ‘We can’t walk that bloody far in one night.’

‘The colonel says you can,’ jeered Coom.

He took out his map and gave us our objectives.

‘There you are, Chris, that’s your camp,’ he said, indicating a spot on the map.

‘But sarge, that’s fucking miles. It must be over twenty kays.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said sarcastically. ‘It’s just that I thought I should give you the furthest one because you’ve just been on honeymoon. We must get you back into shape you know’

Defeated, we commenced our preparations, then briefed our sticks. It was just like an action replay, because the men offered the identical objections we as stick leaders had made to Sergeant Coom. That didn’t help either.

We commenced our trek at dusk, and found it heavy going. Besides that, it was a moonless night which made map-reading difficult. I stopped every half hour or so to check our position and consulted the map with the aid of a pen-light torch.

‘Corp,’ one of the men pleaded after our fifth stop, ‘can’t we have a smoke?’

‘No, it might compromise us.’

At the next halt though, I relented and gave the men permission to smoke. This was strictly against regulations, but I rationalised that so long as the cigarettes were well hidden it wouldn’t do any harm. Besides, the possibility of another smoke gave the men the incentive to keep going until the next stop.

Dawn had started to break as we crept stealthily up to the target area.

I radioed the major when we were ready to go in, then formed the men into a sweep line and advanced up the hill.

It was deserted. It obviously had been for at least a year.

‘After all that,’ spat Nicholson. ‘We walk our butts off and it’s a fookin’ lemon.’

‘Well at least we got here. Let’s have a brew-up.’

I radioed the major with my report, and to my surprise he told us to stand by for immediate uplift.

We had only just got there. I couldn’t believe the chopper was already on its way.

‘What about the brew-up?’

‘There’s no time. We’ve got to find an LZ.’

The inevitable grumbling ensued. But it made no difference to the situation, and within forty minutes we were back at Grand Reef. Yet another exercise in futility.

Now we were off to Middle Sabi in the Lowveld, we were told, and we clambered on to our trucks in confusion.

A white farmer had been killed there the day before. Combined Operations felt a show of force was appropriate. (We weren’t told this for several days - the normal scenario of ‘the need to know fuck-all’).

Middle Sabi was a relatively new (white-owned) irrigation scheme on the banks of the Sabi River, at the foot of the Chipinga mountains. The climate there is ideal for growing cotton, and the white farmers there were successful and prosperous... and in the centre of the scheme was a nice country club.

We based ourselves up on the golf course next to the clubhouse.

It seemed ideal, for we had the free use of a large swimming pool, and the pub was immediately adjacent. Not only that - the farmers who were

delighted to see us, plied us with drinks whenever we were in the bar.

I don't know how he managed it, but Sarge Coom was a shrewd negotiator and he had spent many hours convincing the major that 11 Troop deserved a spell on stand-by. This meant we were confined to camp, but we didn't mind. At least we weren't out walking.

We began without much enthusiasm to dig the odd shell scrape, and were more than glad to call a halt to our efforts when the farmers made it clear they didn't appreciate their golf course being dug up.

Trooper Nicholson had recently passed his Troop Medic's course and was anxious to practise his newly-acquired injection techniques. Somehow he learned that Hooley had caught VD, and he persuaded the Commando Medic to let him administer Hooley's daily penicillin injections.

'Bloody hell!' said Hooley, objecting vehemently, 'You can't do that. You're no more than a fucking horse quack.'

'Oh, shut up an' tek off your troosers,' laughed Nicholson.

I stuck my head out of the tent to see what the commotion was about, and got a decidedly unpleasant view of Hooley baring his backside.

I watched as Nicholson triumphantiy calibrated his syringe.

'I bet you it's gonna hurt,' moaned Hooley.

'It's nae gonna hurt as much as it would if your fookin' prick fell off,' retorted Nicholson unsympathetically. 'Now fookin' ben' doon.'

'Nicholson, you're a fucking pervert,' Hooley yelled.

He winced as Nicholson plunged the needle into his fleshy, pink rump.

It so happened that Sergeant Coom walked past at that moment, and he looked disdainfully at Hooley.

'Been fucking niggers again have we, Hooley?'

'Fuck off sarge,' moaned the suffering Hooley. 'You know I only fuck white chicks.'

Coom snorted in derision. 'You fucking Pommies are all the same. The only reason you come out here is to get some black meat... All that crap about fighting Communism - huh!'

He sauntered arrogantly away - Coom never walked - he sauntered (haughtily). I withdrew inside to inspect my tent. The rainy season was approaching and I was far from sure the tent was waterproof.

During our first week there, tragedy struck

Sergeant Paul Abbott and his stick were ambushed. Carl Oosterhuizen sustained serious shrapnel wounds in his head, and Joe Byrne was killed. Joe was a short, bespectacled American of Irish descent. He had a New Yorker's dry wit and was popular with everyone. It was a sad blow.

Poor Sergeant Abbott was inconsolable when he arrived back by vehicle, and with unusual sensitivity we left him alone with his thoughts.

At the chopper pad we embarked on the unpleasant task of putting poor Joe in a body bag. Apart from a neat little bullet hole in his forehead, he could have been asleep. His skin though, was pasty with death - kind of grey - and as he wasn't wearing his glasses, I initially had difficulty in recognising him. But he wasn't a 'him' anymore was he? He was a corpse.

The black plastic body-bag was laid on the ground and we gently lifted Joe up and slid him inside. His body seemed incredibly small and significant once it was wrapped in the black plastic folds, and I felt numb as we loaded the body on to the helicopter.

But there was nothing more we could do for him. The war continued and soon Joe Byrne was no more than a memory.

A tribesman named Joseph, who had been collaborating with ZANLA guerrillas, walked into our camp one day and surrendered.

Asked why he had turned himself in, he said the guerrillas had executed his wife and children and he wanted revenge. He was understandably bitter and offered to lead us to the guerrilla camp.

Naturally we were wary.

'How do we know you're telling the truth - that this isn't a trap?' Coom asked.

'Jesus is my witness,' affirmed Joseph raising his right hand. 'They have killed my family and now you must kill them. They are just like dogs!'

His grief seemed genuine, and it was certainly unusual for a local collaborator to turn himself in - let alone act so passionately and openly in front of the Security Forces.

We could only give it a try.

'You know the comrades will kill you if they find out you were responsible, and manage to catch you?' asked Coom.

'I don't care about myself. All I want is for them to die.'

So it was arranged that he would guide us to their bush camp in the Mutema mountains to the east.

The target was about thirty kays from our drop-off point, which was where the main road crossed the Tanganda River. It was rugged country and the route was mostly uphill. Sarge Coom reckoned we should be able to cover the distance in two nights. But the rest of us said we'd prefer to get it over with and do it in one.

'D'you lot really reckon you can walk that thirty kays in one night?' Coom queried.

'It'll be hard going, for sure,' replied Neave. 'But there'll be less chance of a compromise if we don't have to lie up during the day.'

'You bastards just want an extra night in camp don't you!' said Coom. 'Okay, I'll tell the major we'll do it in one... But you okses had better not fucking let me down.'

We began preparation, deciding to travel light. I packed sufficient rations for a day and discarded my sleeping-bag. Galloway decided to carry an automatic shotgun instead of his FN.

'Good idea, George,' I said to him, 'less chance of you bloody well missing with that.'

The men laughed.

The next evening, after darkness had fallen, a vehicle dropped us off at the Tanganda River and we began the long and arduous, uphill hike.

Joseph went in front to show us the way, and we found ourselves hard-pressed to keep up with him... The poor fellow just couldn't wait to get to grips with the enemy - his former masters. We made good progress until about midnight, but after that we began to lag. During the frequent halts we were forced to make, most of us instantly fell asleep on the rocky ground, and Sergeant Coom had to threaten and cajole to keep us going.

'Christ, you're a lot of fucking wankers,' he hissed furiously. 'You promised you wouldn't let me down, and all you want now is beddy byes. Fucking wake up and get a move on!'

We staggered sluggishly to our feet and continued.

By 0200hrs. we were five kays from target and the sergeant said we could sleep for two hours. This, he calculated, would give us ample time to cover the last lap before dawn. We dropped thankfully to the ground and slept where we fell.

No guards were posted. I think Sergeant Coom kept watch himself.

We woke at 0400hrs. feeling only slightly refreshed, and Joseph led us the remainder of the way up the mountain.

Just before dawn we got to the guerrilla camp.

No sentries had been posted and at first we were suspicious. But it became obvious that the guerrillas had thought there wasn't the slightest chance of anyone disturbing them there. They had become complacent in their mountain hideout.

The eight of us watched the camp through a screen of bushes. It was large, and lines of well-maintained huts could be seen in the background.

Soon the camp slowly started coming to life - and suddenly to our horror, we saw a guerrilla armed with an AK rifle, come ambling towards us. He was half dressed and still sleepy, and clearly looking for somewhere to relieve himself.

We levelled our weapons, as Coom muttered with exasperation, 'Shit! Only open fire if he walks on to us. I want to get in closer before we open up... Joseph, no matter what happens you stay here and wait for us,'

Joseph looked very upset and insisted he wanted to go in with us. But Coom was adamant.

The sleepy guerrilla drew closer and closer, and it seemed inevitable we would have to shoot him... This was a pity as Sarge Coom hadn't had time to work out his plan of attack. It wasn't easy. There were dozens of huts in the base, and identifying the ones where most of the guerrillas were still likely to be sleeping was not a job anyone could do in haste.

But as they say, sometimes that's the way the cookie crumbles.

We opened fire, and as the guerrilla dropped Coom bawled, 'Right ... extended line. Let's go!'

Crouching nervously, we formed into a sweep line and advanced.

Figures darted hither and thither amongst the huts, and we kept up a continuous barrage of fire at targets of opportunity. There was little resistance. The desultory chatter of an AK was heard and a few rounds passed harmlessly over our heads. This time the enemy had been well and truly taken by surprise.

'Okay, halt here,' yelled Coom.

We had stopped beside a long, low, thatched barrack room, and I dropped into cover behind a dry stone wall.

A few bodies lay by a burning hut which had been ignited by tracers, but otherwise it looked as if the enemy had fled.

'Fer fuck's sake,' George cursed, 'the bastards have gapped it.'

Sergeant Coom got on the radio while we peered warily into the smoke. An eerie silence hung over the place and it seemed like the battle was over.

But we had not taken into account the large area that the camp covered. The guerrillas had regrouped in a series of fortified huts just fifty metres further up the slope. We soon realised that they held a commanding position.

Suddenly they opened fire with a fierce volley. I nearly jumped out of my skin and cringed lower into cover.

But the rest of the men didn't have the luxury of such good cover and they just huddled down behind what they had, unable at first to return fire.

The guerrillas' fusillade was unpleasantly accurate.

Above the cacophony of sound I heard bullets smacking against my wall, and I cowered even lower. Then George leopard-crawled over and joined me behind the relative safety of the wall.

'Chris,' he shouted above the din, 'I reckon there must be dozens of them.'

'Motherfuckers!' our MAG gunner said succinctly, swinging his gun around and returning fire from a prone position.

'Good man!'

I poked my rifle round the end of the wall and also began shooting. But it didn't help much. It was impossible to accurately identify the guerrilla positions, for they were above us in thick bush.

Then came the rockets.

WHOOSH!

The terrifying RPG projectiles screamed down and exploded around us.

We ducked instinctively as the ground heaved with the detonations, and debris fell all about us.

We were just fortunate that those operating the rocket-launchers were none too accurate and were overshooting their targets.

My ears were still roaring when I saw Sarge Coom stand up.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

'Come on,' he yelled, 'we've got to take that fucking position. Let's go!'

'He must have gone mad,' explained George in a quietly conversational tone.

A rocket exploded fifteen metres behind us. There was a searing pain in my chest and my right hand felt as if it had been stung by a million hornets.

‘COME ON, YOU BASTARDS,’ shouted Sarge Coom, ‘What’s the matter - are you all fucking yellow?... LET’S GO!’

We reluctantly abandoned our cover, and instinctively moved into pairs as we scrambled up the treacherous slope. This was known as the ‘buddy-buddy’ system. One man would give covering fire while the other dashed forward to the nearest cover. Then he would take over while his buddy rushed forward in turn.

Within a few minutes we had worked our way to the top, and the guerrillas immediately began to flee. We might have thought they were mad, but they obviously decided we were crazy. Puffing and gasping we fired a few desultory shots at the disappearing enemy.

‘Well done, ouens,’ panted Coom, ‘that was really good. Now let’s check this place out.’

We began the task of searching the huts, putting each one to the torch after we had finished. We found several bodies, a few of which were civilian. Two of the lads discovered a wounded guerrilla who lay moaning behind a hut. They informed Coom of their find.

‘Okay, patch him up. We’ll have to take him back with us.’

Nicholson set to with his medic’s pack.

We discovered large quantities of weapons and ammunition, and prepared to carry out what we could. The rest we threw into the burning huts to be destroyed by the fire. The destruction of the camp was soon complete, and we prepared for the long walk back.

A single shot rang out. Nicholson had shot the wounded guerrilla.

‘What the fuck did you do that for?’ Coom demanded angrily. ‘We wanted him for interrogation.’

‘He was trying to escape sarge’, Nicholson said blandly.

‘Like fuck he was! How - on his fucking stumps? You cunts just didn’t want to carry him back.’

Nicholson shrugged benignly. Coom was no doubt relieved that a problem had been taken off his hands for the matter was soon forgotten.

Feeling like a cigarette, I pulled a pack from my chest pocket. It was saturated with blood. I’d forgotten completely the earlier pain, and now I was suddenly shocked to find that my chest and right hand were peppered

with tiny pieces of shrapnel. Luckily none of the wounds were serious, but weeks later small fragments of metal were still working their way to the surface.

Joseph was nowhere to be found, but we found considerable blood spoor in the clearing where we had left him, and a few days later we discovered he had been wounded by one of the guerrilla rockets which had blown away his nose, an ear and his right arm. He had fled in terror, and in spite of his grotesque wounds, had run the thirty kilometres back to the main road where he had hitched a lift to Umtali. Amazingly, he was still conscious when he was finally admitted to hospital... and he survived.

We certainly wished him well. He was truly a brave man. He was a hero if ever there was.

Joseph had told us the guerrillas were well established in the mountains, where they had remained undisturbed for months. Accordingly a large operation involving the whole commando plus air support was planned against their bases.

Sergeant Coom and I were taken on a reconnaissance flight to observe the massive target area. It was an immense valley shrouded in dense jungle, and Joseph had said that the numerous re-entrants housed a hornet's nest of guerrilla camps. From the air we saw nothing more than a thick mat of green vegetation... and to cap it all I was violently air-sick.

I was appointed troop commander as Sarge Coom was assisting the major in the aerial direction of the operation. It was exhausting work searching the rugged ravines, and I was impressed by the men's endurance. Somehow it seemed less tiring being in command. Perhaps the added responsibility lessened one's physical shortcomings.

During the week-long operation we came across many guerrilla camps and all of them showed signs of hurried evacuation. They were sophisticated and had obviously been there for a long time. Most of them had rough but comfortable barrack rooms, kitchens, mess halls and well-organised vegetable gardens. A few even boasted ersatz parade grounds - complete with flagpoles.

The guerrillas had chosen well. All the camps were completely invisible from the air.

A Shangaan tracker was working with us and he was good. Generally though, the guerrillas bombshelled as soon as they realised we were on their tracks, and after that there was little point in continuing.

We did engage in a few fleeting contacts and we spent days on end following tracks.

I called in many air strikes too. But the napalm, the SNEB rockets and the Golf bombs proved ineffective in the dense undergrowth.

Yes, the commando claimed a few kills but the operation was hardly a raving success... We had destroyed their base camps and perhaps, temporarily disrupted their supply routes. Even so, we knew very well that it wouldn't take them long to establish new camps in other dark ravines. We were dejected as we sat around the camp fire back at our Middle Sabi base.

'D'you know' said Neave, 'you'd need a whole army to flush the gooks out of that valley?'

You're right,' agreed Nicholson, 'an' we been running around like chickens wi' their fookin' heads off.'

'Like looking for a needle in a haystack,' confirmed Hooley

We agreed the only way to win the war was to strike at the guerrillas' major rear bases in Moçambique and Zambia. As usual, we in the lower ranks felt we knew how the war should be conducted.

It was very depressing, and in the circumstances we decided the best course of action was to go to the club and get blind drunk. The local farmers were holding a farewell party for us and the drinks were free. But I felt we'd let them down. The guerrillas were still well ensconced in the region.

There was very little free, recreational time for a commando soldier. The officers believed in the old army dictum that the devil finds work for idle hands, and as a result, when not in combat, our days were filled with tasks. An endless supply of sandbags were filled, bunkers were dug, then dug deeper, and the commando would embark on yet another rigorous re-training programme.

We listened to endless lectures and were taught and practised how to strip and assemble guerrilla weapons, how to operate rocket-launchers and mortars, the best methods of laying booby traps and the various ways to destroy enemy fortifications. At regular intervals we went to the rifle range where we expended countless thousands of rounds of ammunition.

But as the war escalated, re-training sessions gradually petered out and, thankfully, became rare occurrences. Range practice however never lost its priority.

After the rigours of combat the last thing a man needed was to listen to a lecture. What he wanted was time to unwind... a shower, a cup of tea in the mess, or a beer in the canteen. So in the latter stages of the war, after the morning muster parade, pokey drill and the camp chores, we were stood down and left to our own devices in anticipation of the inevitable callout siren which howled at least once a day

Reading and letter-writing were priority occupations. Apart from that, we played guitars and did the same things as other soldiers do anywhere. A card game for instance, would always be in progress somewhere in camp, with all-comers being welcome to join in.

Goss Condon and I sometimes organised quiz sessions which proved mentally stimulating and entertaining. Many of the troops just sunbathed, or sat around mess tables drinking tea, arguing and discussing every topic under the sun.

Film shows on a rickety projector in the dining hall were regular occurrences, and even though the films were old and corny, we appreciated those temporary escapes from reality.

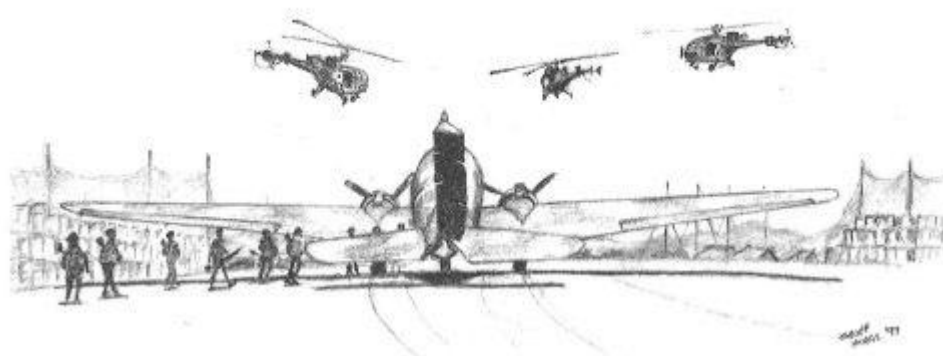
In the operational base camps the nights were usually times of frivolity. Night callouts were rare, primarily because the pilots couldn't fly their helicopters at night due to the lack of a horizon. So apart from guard duties and radio watch we were free to do as we pleased.

Guitars strummed around the camp fires and the men sang everything from sad romantic ballads to rugby songs. If the base had a pub it was packed, with beer-drinking competitions and dart games always in progress. Sometimes those pub evenings would turn into impromptu cabaret nights, with everyone from the officers down performing unrehearsed and (to us) hilarious acts.

The main joy of nights at base camp though, was the relative freedom and safety one felt after the hardships of the daylight hours. Just being alive was celebrated in an orgy of drink and song. This in turn, despite the throbbing heads, helped us through the rigours of the next day. Just the thought of the next evening gave us something to look forward to, and that we drank far too much and too frequently for young men of our age didn't matter.

Later though, such habits, formed during the war that was their *raison d'être*, proved hard to break. Many of my comrades still tend to drink too much. I am an alcoholic.

All of us started at the top of the mountain, young and full of hope. But our parents' war changed all that. There was no glory - just drink, drugs and death.



CHAPTER 33

The Cheetah

Excerpts from 'The Cheetah' Magazine

COMMANDO NEWS

Well the Lovers have done it again! For the second bush trip in a row we have proved that we are able to make love AND war by beating, for the umpteenth time, the Battalion record for the number of kills in a bush tour. (A record we held anyway) During 13th June to 25th July 1978 we managed to account for 80 Charlie Tangos (their last tango in Mtoko) and in our latest tour, 9th August to 20th September 1978, 84 “Chengis” (a Lover’s derogatory term for a terrorist) were exterminated. Come on the other Commandos, we can’t carry you all the time! See our new Training Manual ‘All’s fair in Love and Martial War’ on general issue to all Lover personnel (or would-be Lovers).

EX-LOVERS

Lt. Jug Thornton has passed onto other pastures and has been posted to Battalion H.Q for a while. Once again it is noted that the battle-hardened Strike Force knew where to look for true talent. Jug goes nursing his ‘Old K-car injury’ after a profitable and exciting tour with The Lovers and we wish him a fond farewell.

2 Lt. Fabian Forbes, our “Mangwanani” specialist is off to Training Troop for a while to teach Shona customs. A place will be reserved for you in the Commando until February next year so see you then with luck.

2 Lt. Andre Scheepers has now successfully passed the SAS selection and we wish him happy soldiering and good hunting in his new unit.

W.O.2 John Norman, D.M.M. Congratulations on your new promotion and well-deserved award of the D.M.M. W.O.2 Norman has been posted to Training Troop and we wish him luck and thank him for all the excellent service he gave 3 Cdo.

C/Sgt. John 'That Reject from Andrew Fleming' Coleman has successfully passed the Potential Officer Course, Officer Selection Board and is attempting to coerce the staff of Hooterville into issuing him a pip or two! You know what they say about bullshit baffles brains? Jokes aside - good luck Colour, we hope to see your dazzling shoulders in the near future.

Sgt. Paul Abbott is off to destinations unknown. We thank him for his creditable operational service and wish him luck in his new appointment.

NEW LOVERS' "KARIBU" (ie. Welcome).

2 Lt. Chappie 'wet behind the ears' Rosenfels is now the new leader of 14 Troop.

C.S.M Terry Miller has taken over as chief whip.

S/Sgt. Brian Lewis is now the new 'mustard to custard' specialist.

"Karibu" to the following new troops: Michael Chance, Eike Elsaesser, Rodney Taylor, Keith Rogers, Alan Palmer-Jones and our new Doc, Cpl. Pete Rice.

ATTACHED LOVERS

Cpls. Norris and Percy Hodgson are doing service with Training Troop. What with 2 Lt. Forbes, C.S.M Norman, Cpl. Norris and Cpl. Hodgson all overseeing the training, the other Commandos can relax with the knowledge that they will in future receive an injection of Lover fighting ability, charm and fortitude, otherwise only experienced in 3 Commando. We hope that it will serve to bring the other Commandos up to an acceptable standard!

KILLED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

The Commando deeply regrets the loss in action of two of our fighting Lovers. Tprs. Simon Clark and Joe Byrne died fighting for Rhodesia. Both

excellent soldiers who will not be forgotten by the Commando. Our sympathies to their families.

TROOP NEWS

(for which Commando H.Q would like to apologise to all readers).

11 TROOP

Since the last issue we have undergone numerous changes - for better or worse is highly debatable. We say our fond farewells to 2 Lt. 'Rommel' Forbes who goes to Training Troop (there goes the standard of recruits), C/Sgt John Coleman on Potential Officers Course (him an officer?) and finally to Cpl. Bob 'Shoulders/Basic' Smith to D.R.R (we hear by special request of Rh.M.P). Thanks to you all and the best of luck.

From 12 Troop comes Sgt. (check in the last issue for attributes) Coom. Our two faithful N.S "Please can we go on Stop 1, Banana 6 and on all externals" Mesham and Botes return to the fold with happy heart. To them and the new bunch of troopies - Welcome.

Our heartiest congratulations to L/Cpl. George Galloway on his well-deserved B.C.R. Confirm you only did it for a few days off in town? Enough is enough and we end with a quick "It really did happen" from one of our new troopies.

"Mark, do you have the cammo cream?"

"No, ask the Tracker."

"Matshonga, do you have the cammo cream?"

"Aaah eeweh!" - plus the rest.

12 TROOP

12 Troop or 'Mobile Flex Unit' continues to ripple around the camp, barebreasted with biceps bulging. First of all we would like to say good-bye to Sgt. 'Fonz' Coom who has gone to impart good manners and 'how to behave in public' lessons to 11 Troop. Hellos to C/Sgt. 'Daisy' Flowers, Tprs, 'Rock' Botha, 'Yank' Elsaesser, Gordon Fry and welcome back to our T.A member, Jerry Stander, with his Mobile Daglo Panel. Welcome back

also to the two flexes who have recovered from flex injuries, Claude Botha and Alex Nicholl. The latter has returned from his three month skive, deep in love and is heard to hum himself to sleep with 'The Wedding March'.

Derek Bowhay, who has returned from the 'Donkey Wallopers' after discovering that cleaning out horse manure wasn't such a skive. He has excelled himself on the volley ball court - when no one else is available to play. 'War Story'. Walsh has left us for a month's vacation, all expenses paid at a well known hotel' in Bulawayo where no doubt he will recount his experiences to spell-bound listeners. 'Piggy' Watt and Chalky are at the moment oozing charm and sex-appeal to the birds in Durban and no doubt we will hear about it when they return. 'Star Wars' Gillespie continues to cook like an extra-terrestrial alien scattering the enemy in all directions. 'Blob' Wilkens has swelled the ranks with his considerable flex frame. Well, that's all, keep flexing.

13 TROOP

Well a lot has happened since our last news. Some good, some bad, some mediocre and some... Starting from the top, Lt. Roger Carloni has taken over from 2 Lt. Andre Scheepers (that's the bad news!). Cheers to 2 Lt. Scheepers and well done on your recovery and passing S.A.S Selection. Cpl. Percy Hodgson has been attached to Training Troop for a while but will be back.

Cpls. Jimmy Gibson and Ed Wandel have got - unhappy bank managers - congratulations and condolences. Congratulations and farewell to Mark Wentzel who married a day after his discharge. Cheers Wentz and good luck.

Welcome to National Servicemen, Tprs, Pascoe, Weaver and Taylor. Also welcome back to Tpr. Bain who is now a T.A, poor lad!

L/Cpl. Gavin Fletcher recently departed to the Okavango Swamps to try and locate the rare Okavango bird which travels around on safaris looking for a mate. Well, he didn't make it, so he's back looking for that rare Rhodesian bird - seen any lately?

14 TROOP

14 Troop welcome their new Officer 2 Lt. D.C. Rosenfels. Last bushtrip, after attempting to break a leg on Para Course, he was only able to hobble about until the next course came up which he passed without any serious damage to his body (we think!).

At the moment Cpl. Noms is attempting to gain his third stripe while Fergus O'Brien is busy trying to swop his MAG for a stripe. L/Cpl. Wanen is on holiday despatching R.A.R and has just written asking for a posting to them and a big pot of cammo cream.

This bush trip started off with four weeks of pack-slogging including mountain climbing and swimming lessons where 2 Lt. Rosenfels had the problem of being wet up to his neck while the majority of us only got our knee caps wet.

The four-week episode came to an end on a sad note with the loss of Tpr. Joe Bryne doing his second bush trip with us. Our sympathy and respects to his family and friends in the U.S.A. We also send our condolences to family and friends of Tpr. Simon Clark of New Zealand whom we lost the previous bush trip.

We say good-bye temporarily to 'Nick the Greek' Ambrosiadis, who's mastered the art of fire and movement. He is now acting head waiter with a damaged shoulder. Another departure was that of L/Cpl. Condon who decided that the beach and sun of South Africa were far more pleasant than six week bush trips and is now A.W.O.L. Madness!

Finally we would like to welcome Tprs. Leighton, Foulds, Palmer-Jones and Rogers to the Troop.

LOVERS VIBES

We hope to produce a song for each issue of Cheetah. Herewith the first:

What's it worth?

(Sung in slow Scottish drawl)

I'm lying in my bed, I'm in Room 26
And I'm thinking of the things I've done
Like drinking with troopies

And boning my boots
And counting the medals I've won.

Chorus

Oh Sergeant is this the adventure you meant,
When I put my name down on the line
Oh you talk of the sunshine, the booze and the birds,
And I'm asking you Sergeant
Where's mine?

I've a brother in Jo'eys
With long curly hair
When I signed up he said I was 'mull'
He said shooting 'floppies' just was not his scene
That brother of mine wouldn't cull.

Chorus

But I can put up with most things
I've done in my time
I can even put up with the pain
But what do you do,
With a round in your head
When you're facing a lifetime in bed?



CHAPTER 34

CGT-2, Zambia – October 1978

CGT

stood for Communist Guerrilla Training Camp. The Special Air Service had identified one that was situated near the Great North Road in Zambia as a major ZIPRA training camp. The SAS were becoming increasingly successful in their cross-border raids, and were calling on the Air Force and the RLI to assist when a target was considered too big for them to handle on their own.

We knew something was in the offing when we were unexpectedly recalled from Middle Sabi. For one thing there was a sense of urgency amongst the officers as we struck camp. But for the time being they weren't saying anything (as was normal).

The commando was rushed back to Salisbury, and on arrival given an unexpected night off. We were told to make the most of it, for as from the next morning we would all be confined to camp.

I'm telling you, it's a raid,' insisted Neave.

'Oh, ja,' queried Galloway, unimpressed. 'Where?'

'How should I fuckin' know? It can only be in Zambia or Moçambique.'

'Huh - probably be another lemon.'

The next day we began getting our kit together. Sarge Coom said we were definitely going on a raid, but he didn't know where. They issued us with CSPEP containers, which at least showed us two things - first we were to be para-dropped, and second we would be carrying a lot of equipment.

That evening we were driven to the New Sarum Air Base for the official briefing. There were hundreds of troops there, all filing slowly into the big PTS hangar.

The atmosphere buzzed with excitement, and I got the feeling I was attending a film première rather than a military briefing.

Argylle stuck close to me.

‘Bloody hell, corp, I reckon the whole battalion’s here!’

‘Looks like it, Tom.’

‘Check all the brass.’

I looked around. There were majors, colonels, brigadiers and even a general or two. We sat down on large stands arranged in a quadrangle, one side for each commando. The entire battalion was there. This had to be big!

In the centre of the quad was a huge scale model that I took to be of a guerrilla camp. I studied it closely and was impressed at the minute attention to detail. Bunkers, trenches, barrack rooms, lecture hall, messes... everything appeared to be there. Certainly it was plain that nothing of importance had been missed out.

Major Snelgar stood with a group of officers on the side and even he seemed impressed by the occasion.

The general welcomed us, and after a brief introduction handed over to an SAS captain who immediately launched into the operational plan. There were three targets, all of them in Zambia.

Phase One of the operation would be an Air Force strike on the ZIPRA base at Westlands Farm, just outside Lusaka. Phase Two was an attack by the entire SAS on the ZIPRA base at Mkushi, north-east of Lusaka. It was to coincide with the Westlands strike.

Phase Three was our attack on the CGT-2 ZIPRA base, which would unfortunately be mounted only after the Dakotas and Alouettes had finished delivering the SAS troops to Mkushi... It seemed we would be without the element of surprise.

The SAS captain was thorough and professional. His steely-eyed expression never changed as he pinpointed the guerrilla strong points and estimated their numbers, which ran into several hundreds. Finally he wished us luck. (A nice touch.)

I felt privileged to be allowed access to such information. It looked as if the SAS were accepting us as equals... Well - almost.

We stayed up late that night preparing our kit.

The job of 3 Commando was to secure the western flank of the camp, and we now knew we would go in by parachute.

II Troop was designated to be the first on the ground, and in a moment of panic, I learned I would be the 'first in the door' - literally the first on the ground. And the guerrillas would no doubt be sitting there waiting, their machineguns cocked and ready for that first easy target as it gossamered down towards them.

'Still, what a way to go - the first man to be killed at CGT-2!' I thought, almost resigned to my probable fate.

The next day was spent making final preparations. We drew mortars, 3.5 rocket launchers, landmines and countless thousands of rounds of ammunition. The CSPEP containers were very heavy.

Sarge Coom allocated the men to their sticks. Pennekan was my MAG gunner, with Carl Oosterhuizen and Tom Argyllle my riflemen. They were all good men and I was happy.

That night under the cover of darkness we flew to Kariba Airport which was the forward base. We slept where we could under the wings of the Dakotas, in the airport terminal, and even inside the aircraft themselves, for once we were not overly concerned with comfort.

I sat out on the tarmac apron with Tom Argyllle. The stars twinkled brightly in the clear Rhodesian sky as we sat talking, looking at the shadowy rows of Dakotas, and the huddles that were our comrades slumbering beneath the wings. Tom and I could talk for hours on end - mainly on military history.

Charlie Warren grunted behind me to show he was still awake, and turned over in his sleeping-bag.

'Argyllle, when are you bastards going to sleep?'

'Sorry, corp,' whispered Tom, 'Corporal Cocks and I are just having a goodnight fag.'

'Fucking nuisances!'

'Fuck you too, Warren.'

'Wind your neck in, Cocks.'

'D'you wanna smoke?'

'Oh well - why not.'

Warren wriggled from his sleeping-bag and squatted next to us, and for a while we languidly puffed cigarettes and talked shit.

They were my buddies - the best buddies in the world. We'd go anywhere together.

When dawn broke we were ready.

The Air Force had gone in at Westlands and the guerrilla casualties seemed phenomenal.

The SAS had attacked at Mkushi and had killed hundreds.

Our adrenaline began to pump as we waited in the sweltering Kariba heat, listening to the reports coming in. Would we go in at all?

Then at lunchtime we were told to saddle up and we ran to collect our parachute harnesses.

Here we go at last!

We clambered into the waiting Dakotas.

Once inside, I was pleased to be the 'first in the door' as it was known. It was baking hot and the poor blokes in the front of the aeroplane were suffering badly. I felt a blast of cooler air coming through the door as we took off, and I adjusted the position of the bulky container between my knees.

Within minutes of being airborne, we flew over the awesome Kariba Gorge of the Zambesi River. I shifted the container again and peered through the door. The large formation of Dakota aircraft carrying the airborne Rhodesian Light Infantry looked impressive and powerful.

Suddenly I felt good... So what if I did die? Everyone had to go some time.

The Number One despatcher nodded, and we manoeuvred ourselves into upright positions.

I glanced through the door and saw some of the Daks peeling off.

This was it. We were going in.

At least, being first in the stick I didn't have to drag my container the length of the aircraft to get it to the door.

Red light on!

Shuffle, shuffle.

I looked down at the Zambian landscape.

It seemed very close as it flashed past below us... Ten to one, I thought, the pilot is flying at less than five hundred feet.

I tried to correlate the ground below with the scale model back at New Sarum, but without success.

Green light on.

Go!

I floundered into oblivion, expecting to fall like a stone. But almost immediately the parachute cracked open, and when I glanced up I saw many others mushrooming above me.

The thought flashed across my mind that the guys were getting out of the plane in one hell of a hurry, considering they were laden with containers.

Oh Jesus, the container!

I snapped the quick-release hooks and the CSPEP fell away.

The wind was not too strong... it should be an easy landing.

The next worry was the enemy.

I cocked my head and glanced down.

Oh, my God!

They were all over the place, at least twenty of them, scurrying around like ants, increasing in size all the time as I floated towards them. I felt utterly helpless as green tracer popped around my chute. I recalled that we had always been told to hit a descending parachutist with small arms fire is very difficult. It was small comfort to me.

It was like a movie, except we weren't at Arnhem - we were at CGT-2, a miserable, little ZIPRA guerrilla base in the middle of Zambia.

I groped frantically for my Walther pistol but aborted the attempt when I saw the ground rushing up towards me. I needed both hands and all my wits about me for the landing.

The container hit the ground with a violent crunch, and I subconsciously noted it hadn't fallen apart or exploded. Gratefully, I felt a kill in the wind as I pulled down on the lift webs.

I was gliding.

I floated easily to earth and didn't even bother to tuck my head in to my chest.

It was beautiful

I landed on my feet in the stand-up position, which filled me with confidence. What a way to start a battle. Who could kill you after a 'stand-up' like that?

I thumped open the quick-release box and unsnapped my container.

My rifle was okay... my radio was okay... I was okay.

I looked around and counted.

Argylle... Pennekan... Oosterhuizen... they were all okay.

Good.

A couple of hundred metres away I saw a paratrooper strung up in a tree. Green tracer tore past the helpless figure but I was unable to make out if he had already been hit or not.

We formed into a sweep line and headed east.

We had been dropped right on target, and the toy trees and bunkers on the scale model back at New Sarum now began to make sense.

The faint throb of a helicopter could be heard away to the east amidst the dull ‘doof-doof’ of the guerrillas’ heavy armaments.

The bastards were still there and fighting.

I licked my lips. ‘Oos, that looks like a bunker over there,’ I said pointing at a flat, evil-looking monster that humped out of the earth a few metres ahead.

‘It is.’

‘Boetie,’ I shouted, ‘put a burst down that bunker.’

Pennekan ran forward and dropped into a prone position.

Firing short accurate bursts, he let off a whole belt into the aperture of the bunker. As there was no reaction, I decided it was empty and signalled the sweep line to continue.

We stopped and started continuously, as others down the sweep line came into contact with the enemy, and the crackle of gunfire merged together to become one great sound.

Suddenly the ground around me exploded in a thousand places.

I had to be dead.

I dropped and looked around frantically, and felt hugely relieved when I saw that the rest of the stick had gone safely to ground.

‘Twelve-seven dead ahead, corp.’

The guerrillas’ heavy machinegun continued to pound away relentlessly and I grabbed my radio handset.

‘Tony?... Tony - can you hear that twelve-seven?’

‘That’s affirmative.’

‘Could you sort him out from the left flank?’

‘Roger... give covering fire.’

‘Okay’

My stick began retaining fire at the enemy as fast as we could, but our efforts felt ridiculously ineffectual. I watched Sergeant Coom’s stick rise and start sprinting up the left flank.

One of them stumbled and fell.

Oh, shit... was he dead?

'Keep going, Tony, you got 'em,' I hollered excitedly.

The enemy fire was still furious. But suddenly the gunner didn't know where to fire. Should he fire straight ahead at us - or to the left at Coom's men?

We crept forward slowly and suddenly I was no longer scared. Besides, it was really just a question of percentages. Either you got it or you didn't. My men gave me heart too. Boetie was scared, but he was cool - in control. Oos was also scared but he suppressed his fear well. They were there for me - they wouldn't let me down.

Tom was doing really well. He wasn't even trying to cover himself. He just crouched down and pumped round after deliberate round into the enemy gun position.

One of Coom's men tossed in a frag and I hunched at the muffled detonation.

Then there were no more twelve-seven rounds.

My heart raced. We'd sorted those gooks out. Now where were the rest of the bastards?

'What's the story, Tony?' I asked Sarge Coom over the radio.

'All clear, Chris. Get up here.'

'You okay?'

'Roger.'

Pennekan began loading another belt and I waited. When he was done we crept forward. Coom and his men had done a good job. In the foxhole three dead guerrillas lay slumped around the Russian 12.7

Nicholson was in there like a flash, scavenging for watches.

'Trust a bloody Scotsman,' Coom laughed.

I took a long swig from my canteen, then we moved out for the next target. We were on a roll.

We hadn't been going long when we found it.

Argyle almost stepped on a concealed bunker and was fortunate not to be blown away by an AK Bunkers are the worst. Entering an occupied bunker is as daunting as making a sortie into Hades. But now I really felt composed and completely in control of my emotions - like a machine. I looked around for Oos.

'Oos, get your bunker bomb.'

Oos reached for his kidney pouch and got out a nasty looking bomb.

‘Can you get it through the crack?’

‘No problem, corp.’

He slithered forward to the aperture and slipped the charge inside.

We dodged back into cover, hearing a few terrified screams which were suddenly cut short by a hollow boom.

‘Let’s go in, Oos,’ I yelled.

We found the concealed entrance and rushed madly down the steps into the bunker.

What was I doing? I suddenly thought, coming to my senses.

We flopped down on the clammy earth and waited to be killed.

There was movement in the corner and I quite instinctively shot at a dying guerrilla.

The report of the shot in the enclosed space deafened me. My ears continued to ring while we checked out the bunker, until we were sure there was no more danger.

Oos was shivering imperceptibly.

He offered me a cigarette. I took it, and discovered I was shaking more than he was.

I didn’t want to move from the shelter of that bunker.

Hadn’t my stick done enough?

How many more did they want us to kill?

I clambered from the bunker with Oos. We collapsed by a stream and drank some water.

Extract from a letter to my wife dated 19th October 1978.

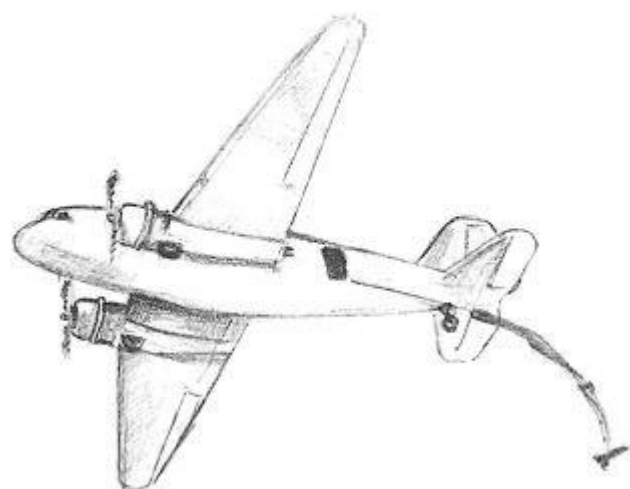
... I am in the middle of Zambia. We have just raided a camp. Yesterday we moved to Kariba and took off for Zambia. It looked very impressive with the Dakotas full of troops. We jumped in and I had a good jump - so far as jumping goes. In my stick Boetie is my machinegunner and the other two guys are Tom Argyle and Carl Oosterhuizen... We are now sitting by a lovely river waiting to be picked up, but I think we’ll only move out tomorrow as there are so many troops here... I have collected a nice hat, a poncho and a box of Russian matches as souvenirs... There is a constant noise of jets and helicopters around us. Evidently two Hunters have been flying above Lusaka Airport warning them to keep Zambian Air Force planes on the ground. It seems the Zambians were cooperative... A battle

has just commenced somewhere over to the east. I pray we don't have to go as well, because I feel very drained. Zambia is a beautiful country with lots of game around, but I'll be happier when we get back to Rhodesia.

We weren't involved in any more fighting. The operation drew to a close, because most of the guerrillas had escaped from the base after hearing news of the Air Force raid on the Westlands Farm. I was more than relieved, although I kept this to myself. So the gooks had gone? Well, it wasn't our fault. I was angry for a while after, as we believed we'd been compromised, for we'd only accounted for a few dozen guerrillas.

Later I learned the facts. Altogether in the combined raids on the three bases, our Security Forces had accounted for upwards of two thousand ZIPRA soldiers.

So. in the final analysis what difference did an extra bunker really make?



CHAPTER 35

Grand Reef – November 1978

O

nce after despatching, as we came in to land at Grand Reef, the undercarriage refused to come down. The pilot aborted the landing, then flew circuit after circuit around the airfield, as he desperately tried every trick in the book to lower it. After each attempt he made a pass close to the control tower so they could tell him if he had succeeded.

But each time the answer was in the negative.

Finally, the pilot told us to strap in and brace ourselves for a belly-landing.

‘Sweet Mary, Mother of God,’ whispered Charlie Warren, crossing himself, ‘I think we’re gonna die.’

The pilot took the Dak in for the final approach. As we watched the grey railway rush past beneath us, the plane seemed to be hurtling to its doom... We were afraid.

Then miraculously, at the last possible moment, the undercarriage suddenly dropped down of its own accord. The control tower yelled the good news and the pilot aborted the crash landing and took us up again. Moments later we landed normally without further problems.

We felt far from normal. Just deeply relieved and very, very thankful.

Excerpts from letters written to my wife during November 1978.

2nd November 1978... Rain appears imminent and my tent appears particularly non-waterproof. At least, though, the holes let the breeze in. The padre is here at the moment, helping with spiritual guidance for the brethren... I got a letter from Goss Condon the other day and he says he is not returning. It was an amusing letter, but quite sad in a way, as he realises he will likely never see us again. He asked us to send some photos... I am

despatching at the moment, which is nice as I don't feel like contacts in this heat. It is a real pleasure to be back on fireforce after having walked our butts off. At least we usually get a decent night's sleep and have a shower every day.

6th November 1978... Time seems to be dragging and although there are only nine days of this bush trip left, it seems like eternity... In my last letter I said my tent looked very non-waterproof. It later poured with rain and proved me right. Grant Hughes and I sat watching the water level rise to the top of the stretcher. We then realised we had positioned the tent at the wrong end of the camp's drainage system, hence the great floods through the tent. So for the fourth time we have moved house and are now in a better position. A bit of water still gets in, but at least we are only five metres from the pub... Paul Abbott has been posted from the commando for misbehaving. It is a shame and we were sorry to see him go. Charlie Warren arrived back yesterday and we polished off a bottle of brandy together and got drunk. He certainly livens up the place... I am lying in my sleeping-bag at the moment and it's drizzling outside. It has been drizzling for the last three days. I have spent all morning lying in bed. Lying in bed all afternoon will relieve the boredom as it makes a change from lying in bed all morning... I am not despatching any more as they are short of stick leaders. I am back as stick leader of Stop One, which means on callouts my stick will be first on the ground. I'm just grateful we'll be heliborne and not para... The padre gave a service yesterday It wasn't too bad and he has quite a sense of humour.

On the 13th November 1978, I turned twenty-one. That was odd by RLI standards. I had served in the RLI for more than thirty-five months.

I hoped the news of my birthday hadn't leaked out, as Charlie Norris, the last fellow to celebrate a twenty-first in the commando, had been roughly manhandled and thrown into a stinking, muddy trench.

Rank was irrelevant to these proceedings, and it was usual for the troopers to take vindictive liberties on the unfortunate victims. This could be painful and humiliating - ask Charlie Norris!

A diligent commando clerk went through his records before a bush tour and put a red asterisk against the name of anyone whose twenty-first

would occur during the trip. The day before the birthday he would pass the information on to the CSM or the CQ.

He knew full well that not only would the victim get his treatment, but he would also have to pay for a couple of crates of beer in the pub that evening... And I was not exempt.

Colour Sergeant Lewis took the muster parade that morning and I really thought I was in the clear, until I noticed Dippenaar grinning at me. We finished drill, and fell in again to be assigned the daily chores.

Colour Lewis, with Hugh McCall lurking by his side, addressed the parade, and at his first words my heart sank. There was no escape... I was in for it.

‘It seems we have a birthday boy in our midst.’

A hum of expectation rippled through the ranks.

‘Corporal Cocks is twenty-one today’ the Colour Sergeant continued, ‘so now we will sing “Happy Birthday” for him’.

Everyone began singing enthusiastically in my honour, while a number of faces turned and leered at me.

‘Face your front, Botes,’ I ordered, attempting to maintain a semblance of authority.

Harry Botes smiled, or rather sneered, before obediently turning to his front.

The song ended and Colour Lewis again spoke, this time more ominously.

‘I feel that as Corporal Cocks is twenty-one we ought to give him a little birthday present, don’t you?’

The rest of the sentence was drowned as the roaring troopies broke ranks and grabbed me. Warren and Dippenaar were in the van of the pack. But as I expected.

Troopers Harry Botes, Simon Mesham and ‘Budgie’ Holmes were the first to get me.

There was a flurry of arms and legs as I yelled abuse at them, and tried vainly to defend myself. But I was soon pinned down, picked up and carried to a large muddy puddle near the troop MAG bunker.

‘Right ouens, let’s have a twenty-one bump salute!’ ordered Warren.

They dumped me unceremoniously into the slime and rubbed me in it, then bounced me up and down twenty one times, until finally they left me spluttering and cursing in the mud.

To finish off appropriately, a few 'friendly' punches were thrown at me as I staggered off to the showers.

My humiliation was complete.

However later during tea break in the mess, I was presented with a beautiful cake. The lads had chipped in and bought it for me in Umtali, and I was deeply touched by their kindness.

Needless to say, as I began to cut the cake, the siren started to howl.

'Oh sod it,' cursed Warren, 'a fuckin' callout, would you believe it?' Snatching up his rifle, he crammed as much cake as possible into his mouth and dashed off towards the chopper pad, shouting over his shoulder as he went, 'Don't finish the cake - and make sure the dops are cold tonight.'

Within seconds the mess was all but deserted, my cake looking as forlorn as I felt.

My stick was second wave and I sincerely hoped we wouldn't be needed... What a way to spend my twenty-first birthday!

The day dragged slowly by and I continued to pray my stick wouldn't be called. Then at about 1600hrs. Colour Sergeant Lewis came over to me.

'Chris, they need more sticks on the ground,' he said. 'Get the rest of second wave together and get your arses over to the chopper pad ASP'

I swore silently, knowing this meant we would more than likely be staying out in the bush for the night.

So much for my birthday party.

Ten minutes later we were airborne and flying west over the meandering Odzi River. Fields of maize and Virginia tobacco rolled by beneath us, as we headed towards the contact area.

The chopper pilot gave me a quick briefing over the radio. The fireforce had been in contact with a group of over forty guerrillas. This had resulted in some fierce fighting and my stick was ordered to link up with one of the first wave sticks and execute a sweep in from the north.

The chopper banked and I caught sight of the troops waiting on the ground for us. We landed, and as we deplaned on the grassy savannah I found Charlie Warren there to greet me. He was grimy and tired, but nevertheless full of crap.

'Shame, poor Chris!' He laughed mockingly. 'We're gonna have to stay here tonight and poor old Chrissy is gonna miss out on his party'

'Wind your neck in, Warren,' I said. 'At least I won't have to buy beers for you bastards tonight anyway'

‘Oh, yes you will,’ he said smugly. ‘I told Pudding to put two crates on your canteen account - so we can drink them tomorrow’

The methodical report of the K-car’s 20mm cannon interrupted our banter and reminded us what we were here for. Soon we were cautiously sweeping southwards towards the contact zone. When we got there it was the same old story.

The pungent smell of napalm... the blood and flesh of dead and dying guerrillas... bodies ripped apart by 20mm cannon and machinegun fire.

The ground was open, so that this time the napalm had been particularly effective. Lumps of the awful stuff were everywhere, some still burning and boring into the flesh of the dead.

We moved away from the sweetly acrid stench of death and withdrew to the shelter of a thickly wooded river line to base up for the night.

‘Did you bring your hip flask?’ Charlie asked hopefully.

Fortunately I had... It was something I seldom forgot.

At dawn when we resumed the mopping-up operation we counted twenty-two dead guerrillas.

While we were at it, a white farmer rode up on his motorbike and walked around with us, taking in the carnage that had occurred on his farm.

His weather-beaten face was haggard and drawn, and he didn’t smile when the fireforce was picked up for return to Grand Reef.

Once again he would be left alone on his farm, facing a highly uncertain future.

At Grand Reef during this trip I had an unfortunate fallout with Major Snelgar.

Shortly before our arrival, a large force of ZANLA guerrillas had clandestinely established an offensive position on the far side of the airfield. From here they had mounted a daring raid on the camp, rocketing and mortaring it with deadly accuracy. Taken completely by surprise, the base had sustained much damage and a considerable number of personnel casualties.

As a result security was tightened. A blackout was imposed at night, and although we were allowed to sit around the embers of the boiler fire during the night, lights were strictly forbidden.

However, for some reason, the officers appeared to consider themselves immune from the ruling. Although they drew the curtains in

their mess after dark, chinks of light could easily be seen from afar, and I took exception to this.

‘It’s bloody wrong,’ I said one evening when we were sitting around the boiler smoking a joint. “Why should the officers be allowed to keep their fucking lights on if we can’t?”

Percy Hodgson agreed.

‘Maybe they think because they’re officers, they’re not going to get bombed,’ he said scathingly.

‘They probably think the gooks are so shit at aiming they’ll hit a trooper’s tent instead of the mess!’ suggested Galloway.

There was a kill in the talking when Lieutenant Carloni was seen walking towards us from the direction of the showers. It didn’t bother me. The fact was we were right and they were wrong, and I continued my diatribe regardless. Lieutenant Carloni stopped.

‘What seems to be the problem?’ he asked aggressively.

Silence greeted his question.

‘Corporal Cocks, you seem to have a lot to say for yourself. Is there a problem?’

I decided to take the plunge.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said, ‘there is. We believe it’s unfair and ridiculous you should have lights on in your mess.’

There - I had said it.

‘Well, perhaps you would like to explain your problem to the major.’

The lieutenant was clearly annoyed, but I couldn’t and wouldn’t withdraw. Nevertheless it was with trepidation that I walked with him to the Officer’s Mess.

Inside the mess the officers and senior NCOs had already sat down for their evening meal.

‘Sir,’ said Lieutenant Carloni to the major who was seated at the head of the table, ‘Corporal Cocks has a problem. I thought he should tell you about it himself.’

The sod was challenging me.

The major motioned me to sit, and while ten pairs of angry eyes bored into me, I said my piece - bluntly.

When he had heard me out the major flew off the handle.

‘Who the hell do you think you are, coming in here and telling me what to do?’

You're just a corporal,' remonstrated one officer. 'Have some bloody respect for your seniors.'

I was trembling slightly when I replied, I do have respect, sir, and I'm not trying to tell you what to do. Lieutenant Carloni invited me here to give my opinion, and my opinion is that having the lights on in the mess makes a mockery of the blackout.'

I thought the major was going to explode with rage and righteous indignation, but I stood my ground.

I was right. I knew it.

They knew it too. The trouble was they had a lot of face to lose if they admitted it.

Instead they continued to shout at me with unnecessary fury until eventually they grew tired of it and I was dismissed.

'Bloody little whippersnapper!' I heard the major snort as I closed the door behind me.

I returned to the boiler to have another joint, and received the congratulations of the others.

A few felt sure that having incurred the wrath of the major, I would surely be transferred to another unit. It was a common way of dealing with dissenters and misfits.

Sarge Abbott had only recently gone for the same reason.

I learned afterwards though, that Sarge Coom had agreed with me and had spoken up in my support, telling the major I was right. This had resulted in a heated argument between Sarge Coom and the major. (Galloway had been listening outside the window).

Two days later the blackout restrictions were lifted for the whole camp.

A frosty truce existed for a few days between myself and the officers. But we were fighting soldiers and at war, so the incident was quickly forgotten.

I was not transferred as I'd honestly feared I might have been, and soon Lieutenant Carloni and I resumed our normal, friendly relationship and the major and I renewed the mutual respect we felt for each other.

The day after this incident, the lads as usual were sitting around the boiler fire which glowed only dimly in the pitch darkness of the night.

I approached the circle of huddled forms after having taken a shower, and noticing Tom Argyle, I stopped to speak to him.

His rifle was cradled in the crook of his arm, butt on the ground and muzzle in the air. But in the darkness I couldn't see this, and as I bent down my left eye slammed hard into the flash hider.

There was immediate, excruciating pain - and I fell to my knees, clutching my eye. Christ - if it wasn't a fucking scorpion, it was a rifle barrel.

It was a few moments before anyone realised what had happened, but when they did they helped me to the Doc's tent and I was laid on the bed.

There was little more he could do than bathe my eye in warm water and dose me with painkillers. I heard later that the Doc initially expected me to lose the sight in my eye. All the tiny blood vessels had burst internally and certainly it looked awful.

When an army doctor from 4-RR came over to have a look at me, he also was worried I would lose the eye. I heard him talking to the medic. But by then I was beyond caring. They could take the damned thing out if they wanted to - anything to stop that unceasing agony. Maybe it would be the end of my war.....

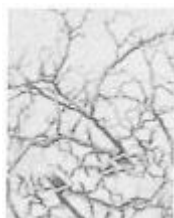
I was fortunate however, and although I had to wear an eye-patch for a couple of weeks, my eye slowly got better. It never really fully recovered. Even today it causes me headaches. In times of stress the pupil dilates and I apparently look weird because the pupils differ so much in size.



BOOK FIVE

1979

BREAKING POINT





CHAPTER 36

Grand Reef - January 1979

A

s our helicopter approached the contact area, the pilot suddenly banked to the right and I knew we were going in. I looked to the pilot who indicated the LZ five hundred metres to our front. Hugh McCall, the stick leader, took off his headset as the chopper tech braced over his guns.

The sky was overcast, almost blending in with the rugged terrain below, and perhaps to a stranger it would have looked forbidding. Certainly the small, cultivated fields studded with rocky outcrops and scarred by steep gullies caused by erosion were not very prepossessing.

But to the eye of someone who had been born in Rhodesia, it was different, and I knew that by African standards the area wore an air of peaceful affluence and contentment.

I knew too, that the hell spawned by the buzzing of helicopters, the Lynx discharging its hideous burden of rockets and bombs, and the ground troops killing and burning, were soon about to shatter that pastoral peace.

I licked my lips and nudged Kevin Grace to let him know we were going in.

We landed with a jolt, and the four of us jumped out and scattered for cover. I found myself with Grace huddled behind a stone wall.

Our chopper disappeared immediately, presumably to pick up another stick, and I quickly appraised the situation on the ground.

McCall, about thirty metres away, was spreading his orange dayglow to indicate our position to the K-car orbiting above.

‘I wonder if they’re here?’ I muttered more to myself than anyone in particular. ‘Come on, Kev, let’s go.’

Our stick leader silently pointed to a kraal about three hundred metres away, and as we spread out and advanced towards it, I licked my dry lips for the hundredth time and checked my MAG. It was okay - the belt wasn’t

twisted... the safety catch was off... and the gun was cradled comfortably against my body, ready to fire.

We reached the outermost hut of the kraal, which happened to be a brick structure with glass windows. Moving forward to clear it, McCall and Bob Smith, another American, smashed in the windows and poked their rifles inside, ready to fire at anything that moved. But there was nobody there, and McCall signalled me to clear the western side of the kraal while he moved around with Smith to check out the eastern side.

The kraal was spotlessly clean. The fences on the perimeter were well maintained, and the cattle and goats nonchalantly grazing were fat and healthy. The village consisted of a double line of huts. Those on the eastern side were the living quarters while the rest opposite were kitchen huts, grain bins and fowl houses.

Everything pointed to a hurried departure - a pot lying on its side, an axe embedded in a newly chopped log - and as Grace and I began moving into the village, I thought that it almost certainly was deserted. Villagers as well as guerrillas, I knew from experience, invariably fled into the bush when they heard the helicopters approaching.

I stepped rashly into the open ground between the rows of huts, thus committing the gravest sin in the guerrilla warfare handbook... I had forgotten that guerrilla warfare has only one rule - and that is, that there are no rules.

And being so foolishly complacent nearly cost me my life - again.

We had only gone about fifteen paces, when from somewhere thirty to forty metres ahead of us, the guerrillas opened up with a terrifying fusillade of fire.

I can clearly remember the chaos of thoughts spinning through my mind as bullets tore angrily around me, ripping up the ground in small, vicious spurts of dirt. For a bizarre moment I felt I should tap-dance to avoid the strikes around my feet.

I felt boxed in by the whining screams and cracks rending the air, and for a moment time seemed to stand still.

'Take cover, Kev,' I screamed obviously, scrambling frantically for the relative safety of the nearest grain bin.

We both reached it at the same time, and collapsed behind its meagre cover as the shots continued to hunt us in a frenzy of bullets that struck the ground dangerously close to our prone bodies.

We were by no means safe, for the grain bin was elevated above the ground and much of the enemy fire found its way beneath it, and I screamed to Grace, 'Get behind that pole!'

The poles supporting the bin were the only real source of cover, flimsy as they were. I felt incredibly vulnerable as I pressed myself as close as I could to the earth and buried my face in the dust. I knew that if the firing continued much longer we were bound to be hit.

Then the firing ceased abruptly.

'Fuckin hell,' stammered Grace, 'that was far too close, corp.'

'You're not fucking kidding,' I said with feeling. Straining my eyes I tried to peer beneath the grain bin. But there was too much dust to see anything, and I warned Grace, 'Keep your eyes skinned. I reckon they were firing from one of those end huts and they'll probably try to gap it now'

I raised myself on my haunches and checked the MAG to see if it was intact. But other than a thick coating of dust, it was miraculously unscratched.

'Chris? Kev? Are you okay?'

It was Hugh McCall shouting to us.

'Ja, we're fine.'

'What happened? Where did they go?'

'Don't know - check to your right. They might try and gap it that way'

There was no reply.

Smith and McCall were sheltering behind a brick building. They could have seen very little, and no doubt were still confused as to what the situation was.

Suddenly I spotted four figures fleeing through a mango plantation about a hundred metres away to our right. The fools - why hadn't they run north out of the kraal - away from us?

I had no time to adopt a decent firing position, let alone get the MAG on to my hip or shoulder. I just swivelled the gun on its bipod and opened fire, straining to hold the butt with my left hand as the gun bucked hungrily. The first burst fell short of the fleeing figures, and I elevated the barrel fractionally, firing all the time.

I could see the bullet strike flicking through the dry leaves, chasing the fugitives, and thought angrily, Oh fuck - I've missed them.

Then suddenly the four figures tumbled together and sprawled headlong to the ground.

The belt was finished by now, and I reloaded and peered through the dust to see if there was any movement beyond the mangoes. Everything was still. And quiet. My ears popped.

I felt almost hysterically elated. I was alive... I was safe. And what's more I had shot the bastards who had been trying to kill me. I mean - how dare they? I asked in consternation.

'I got 'em, Hugh,' I shouted jubilantly. 'I nailed the whole fucking lot!'

McCall and Bob Smith appeared from around the brick building and joined us as we advanced cautiously to check the bodies.

'Where are they?' Hugh asked. He didn't really believe me.

We found the first guerrilla face down amongst the tufts of grass beyond the mango trees, his spine smashed. A bullet-shattered AK lay next to him.

'Clear his weapon, Bob, and search the body' McCall ordered.

Ten metres further on was another body. It was a boy of about fifteen and his head had been blown apart like a melon. He must have been a mujiba running with the guerrillas. His civilian clothes were saturated with fresh, sweet blood. Already the flies were settling on his corpse.

I scanned the ground for the others, but they were nowhere to be seen.

'I fucking hit them - I know I did,' I insisted indignantly. 'I saw four fall.'

McCall remained sceptical.

Then I noticed an SKS rifle half concealed in the grass a few paces away, next to a large antbear hole. I looked inside and saw a crumpled heap of bloodied humanity.

There were two bodies in there, one draped over the other.

I bent to pick up an AK lying on top of the bodies and suddenly there was movement and a pair of eyes stared at me in abject terror.

I jumped back, startled.

'There's one still alive in there, Hugh.'

McCall and Smith came over to the hole.

'Simuka!... Stand up!... Get out of there!'

I brandished my gun, and the guerrilla slowly extricated himself from the clawing embrace of his dead comrade.

As he crawled from the hole I saw why he was taking so long. I had shot him through both legs and he couldn't stand.

“Visa shamwari... Get your friend out,’ I yelled, indicating the body slumped in the hole.

I must have looked particularly fierce, because in spite of his dreadful wounds he struggled desperately to obey me. It was pitiful.

Smith assisted him and soon the corpse was stretched out on the ground near the hole.

I searched it and discovered a diary and other papers of military importance, as well as a wrist-watch which I appropriated.

McCall checked out the wounded man who was losing a lot of blood and whimpering in pain.

‘D’you reckon he’s worth keeping?’ McCall asked.

I shook my head.

‘Okay, Bob, sort him out.’

Smith put his FN rifle against the man’s temple.

The guerrilla’s eyes widened in horror. He obviously couldn’t believe what was happening to him.

Smith pulled the trigger.

The body was thrown violently backwards as the head disintegrated in a shower of blood and brains. The dead guerrilla twitched briefly and then was still.

Times had changed. A year ago we might have saved him, but not in 1979. We didn’t want guerrilla prisoners who might only get a gaol sentence (after all our efforts), or even be reprieved and integrated into the army as a reformed ‘ally’.

Execution in the field, we rationalised, saved the troops extra work - to say nothing of taxpayers’ money.

The officers said that Special Branch badly needed captures for information purposes. But the intelligence we got in the field was always out of date and second grade anyway. So what did it matter?

Besides that, a whole chopper would have been taken up to casevac him, which meant a stick would have had to stay out overnight. Our beers around the boiler were more important.

McCall told Smith and Grace to search the kraal while we checked out the bodies.

When we had finished, McCall went to help the others while I kept guard... It was normal for the gunner to provide cover while the riflemen

searched the huts. A MAG is far too bulky for a man to go bursting into huts with.

Suddenly a shot rang out, followed by a short burst.

After kicking in a door, Smith had found himself face to face with the barrel of an AK. The guerrilla hiding there had fired at point-blank range, but incredibly the volley had missed. Smith had jumped back and loosed off a burst through the doorway.

‘Jesus, that motherfucker jes’ shot at me!’ he complained bitterly in his Georgian accent.

He seemed more astonished than afraid.

Now we faced the problem of how to get the occupant, or occupants, out of the hut.

‘Chuck in a white phos,’ suggested Smith.

‘No, I want the weapons and documents. A phos’ll bum the place down,’ replied McCall. ‘I think I’ll try a couple of HEs.’

We laid down a heavy barrage of covering fire at the door while McCall ran forward and tossed in a grenade.

There was a muffled explosion, but the continuing chatter of AK fire told us it hadn’t worked.

McCall had to throw in another four frag grenades before finally there was silence.

‘That asshole in there jes’ don’t wanna die,’ drawled Smith. ‘Let’s go in and drag him outa there, Hugh.’

They moved forward while I provided cover.

They kicked open the door, filled the hut with more lead and crashed inside.

I watched with my heart in my mouth.

Seconds later they emerged, pushing three women with minor wounds out in front of them.

I went inside and heaved when I saw the carnage. The floor was a swamp of blood, and near to the door lay our dead guerrilla antagonist.

The bodies of an old woman and a little girl were also inside.

How the surviving women had managed to stay alive in that slaughterhouse of bullets and bombs remains a mystery to me.

We had been unaware civilians were inside the hut. But even had we known, we could hardly have done anything else. It was a ‘them or us’ situation and we had no option but to be as ruthless as the enemy. But this

didn't mean we enjoyed killing civilians - even civilians who were in league with the guerrillas. We ordered the women to drag the corpses from the hut, then after searching the place, we set fire to it.

By then the operation had almost come to a close, and we were ordered to join up with the other sticks to carry out a final sweep of the area.

The terrain was thickly covered with acacia trees and jesse bush.

The line had only advanced about a hundred metres when McCall and I spotted two more guerrillas hiding beneath a bush. I raised the MAG to my shoulder and fired a burst at five metres.

Maybe the guerrillas had already been wounded, because they made no effort to fight back.

We then withdrew so the K-car could saturate the area with 20mm cannon rounds and hopefully, detonate the RPG-7 rockets that were still smouldering ominously beside the enemy bodies.

Returning to the kraal, we found the wounded women still sitting silently where we had left them. Their lives were in ruins and their grief must have been boundless.

Later, at the end of the operation, they looked on silently as four choppers landed in an adjacent field.

The Air Force men and Major Snelgar came over to offer congratulations. They looked so clean and fresh.

'Bloody good show, ouens,' exclaimed the pilot who had seen it all from the air, 'that was even better than the movies!'

'Ja, well done you buggers,' said Major Snelgar. 'How many did your stick get, Sergeant McCall?'

'Six, sir.'

'Good effort. Now we can go home and get drunk.' He grinned. 'I'm told it's drinks on the Blue Jobs tonight.'

The men cheered.

The troops nearby began climbing into choppers while others burnt the remaining huts for good measure. The women still hadn't moved, although the heat from the burning huts was intense. It suddenly struck me that they were too terrified to move. I guess they thought they'd be shot if they did.

I hesitated and the tech waved impatiently for me to get in.

Then I looked at the women again, and doubled back to them. 'Listen,' I said, 'You can go - okay? Just go - enda.' I wanted to smile at them to

emphasise my intentions, but I found I couldn't.

They looked at me in relief and stood up as I scurried back to the helicopter. I felt uncomfortable - something just wasn't right.

Back at Grand Reef that night I inspected my webbing and discovered five bullet holes in my side pouches. My Sosegon container, a water-bottle, a tin of bully beef, a spare radio battery and an MAG belt had been smashed by the AK rounds.

I was stunned. And I'd wanted to tap-dance?

Why had I not been hit? Someone had surely been watching over me.



CHAPTER 37

My Last Scene - January 1979

I

had a month of service to go, and I was more than glad my time was coming to an end at last.

I found I was very nervous about going into action. For the first time in my life I began experiencing bouts of raw, naked nerves, and I realised I was suffering the same experience I'd heard others had undergone when their time in combat was nearly up... every danger seemed heightened and the desire to remain alive intensified. This was the time when the percentages were running out.

This was perfectly natural, and it was tacitly accepted that soldiers were allowed to 'skive' during the last couple of weeks of their service.

I was no exception. I went to Major Snelgar and told him straight that I was terrified - that maybe I was losing my nerve - and asked to be put on despatching duties.

Knowing how I was feeling, he was sympathetic and agreed to move me to despatching. But I still volunteered to do a few more spells carrying an MAG. Maybe I had a point to prove to myself.

After our return to Grand Reef, we were engaged in at least one callout a day, and the strain had begun to tell on all of us.

In 1976 we had been enthusiastic when the siren sounded - it was great to get out and see some action. On top of that, anything was a welcome relief from the boredom and drudgery of camp routine.

But things had changed. We didn't have enough helicopters or enough troops to cope with the overwhelming tide of incoming guerrillas.

Extracts from a letter to my wife dated 3rd January, 1979.

... This is the first opportunity I have had to write as we have been out continually for the last few days. There are only six sticks here so we never seem to get a day off - twenty-four men for the whole of Op Thrasher!... I feel exhausted and my whole body aches. Yesterday we were called out at 0530hrs. and got back only after dark... The expected Dakota never arrived so I am not despatching paras. Instead I'm carrying a machinegun. Mind you, I can't complain as I did volunteer. Altogether we have killed five gooks in the last two days... Only one week to go... Gavin has gone back to Salisbury as he finishes then as well, but I still have my DB time to serve. There will definitely be a week of retraining at the start of the next bush trip, so I will ask if it's really necessary for me to go back to the bush for that week... Pray God I don't have to. I'm sick of the army and I'm sure if I stay here much longer I will crack up. Nowadays my nerves are really taut when we go into a contact. Sometimes I'm a shaking wreck, although I hope it doesn't show.

The morning of 5th January 1979 was no different from other days and the gut-wrenching wail of the siren came at about 1000hrs.

The heliborne troops rushed to the chopper pad where the choppers were already starting up.

Together with sixteen paratroopers, I doubled over to the para hut where the parachutes were stored.

The hut was immaculately maintained. Parachutes were laid out on the ground in a row next to each soldier's webbing and pack. All a man had to do was sit on the floor, back himself up to his parachute and strap himself in.

We had got it down to a fine art and the troops were ready for inspection and a final check within five minutes of the siren sounding.

Speed wasn't always vital though. It depended entirely on how far away the guerrilla sighting was.

A Dakota flew much faster than an Alouette, so the Dak pilot timed it to arrive at the scene a minute or two after the choppers in order not to compromise them. Consequently the further away the scene, the less the urgency.

But this time our pilot came running.

'Ten-minute flight, ouens. Let's jump around!'

The troops hurriedly assembled in a line by the Dakota and waited patiently for Charlie Warren and me to inspect them.

First in line was Lieutenant Chappie Rosenfels, the only officer amongst them.

‘How are you feeling, sir?’

‘Okay, all set for a bit of jousting,’ he joked nervously. He was still a boy.

I checked him out... Hit the quick-release box to see it’s secure. Is the pin in? Tug the web straps to see if they are snug. Check that the reserve is secure and the right way up. Make sure the weapon is secured and the safety applied. Is the muzzle taped with masking tape to stop dirt getting in on landing? Right - all okay.

Poor Lieutenant Rosenfels had less than a month to live. He was destined to be killed in action and was posthumously awarded the Bronze Cross of Rhodesia for bravery.

Soon everyone had been checked out and was seated aboard the aircraft.

The engines started up and we taxied down the runway.

Fifteen minutes later we were circling the combat zone.

I looked through the door and saw the helicopters buzzing around below us like infuriated dragonflies.

The senior despatcher wearing the radio headset, signalled that the troops must prepare to jump.

They stood up clumsily and locked their clips on the overhead cable.

Charlie and I gave each of them a final cursory check.

Then the despatcher nodded again.

Red light on.

‘STAND IN THE DOOR’.

Lieutenant Rosenfels shuffled forward.

Green light on.

‘GO!’

I slapped Chappie on his rear and he leaped into space.

‘Go... go... go... go.’

Within twenty seconds the plane was clear.

Charlie looked out of the door to check that all the ‘chutes had opened and gave a thumbs up. Our work was done.

We flew back to Grand Reef, certain that the rest of our day would be clear, and perversely I nursed the hope that the contact would last long enough to get me out of PT.

The base was empty of troops and it seemed almost eerie when we got back.

The second wave had gone. So had a few 4-RR sticks that had been in the camp... Things looked serious.

Charlie and I ran over to the Air Force Ops Room to see what was going on.

Major Snelgar and the Air Force commander were talking over the radio.

One of our men had been killed and two others wounded.

It sounded a heavy scene.

The guerrillas were trapped, fighting back bitterly, and a call was made for Canberra bombers to come in from New Sarum.

They were our ultimate weapon.

The ground troops were instructed to retire from the contact area to clear the way for the air strike.

The Air Force warrant officer spoke to Charlie and me.

‘You two had better go and round up everyone left in camp. Use them to organise what sticks you can.

Charlie and I glanced at each other in dismay.

The only soldiers left in camp were the cooks, bottle-washers and clerks, few of whom had ever seen a shot fired in anger.

But we did as we were ordered, and within a short time we had three sticks ready for action.

As fighting soldiers they made a pathetic group.

Most had only one or two magazines apiece, no grenades, no rockets, no sleeping-bags and no rations... Few even had adequate clothing.

I admired them for being prepared to go at all, but I was terrified at the thought of having to lead this motley crew into action.

We waited at the chopper pad for most of the day. But in the end our services were not called for.

At about 1600hrs. a chopper landed, to bring in a casevac and take on fuel.

I went over to speak to the pilot to find out what was happening.

The sight that greeted me was horrendous.

On board were five 3 Commando casualties.

Trooper Brad Little was dead, his mouth and eyes agape in a mask of death.

Trooper Bob Smith had been shot in the stomach and was bent double, his eyes closed and his mouth set in an agonised grimace.

Neil Hooley had been shot and bayoneted through the legs. His head was thrown back and he was breathing heavily as he clasped my hand.

‘Chris, will you get my washing for me this evening?’

Neil always had a phobia that someone would steal his washing, and now even when critically wounded he was still worried about his bloody washing. This was the third time he had been wounded, which resulted in him later being given the nickname of ‘Deathwish’.

‘Okay Neil, I’ll get your washing and stick it in your trunk. Don’t worry about it.’

He clasped my hand even harder and seemed much relieved.

Troopers Pilbeam and Wilkens were in the back seat of the chopper. Pilbeam had taken a round through both eyes - his head was wreathed in bloodied bandages. The next day the specialist’s verdict would be that he was totally blind. Ray Wilkens had been shot through both the hip and leg but he would eventually recover.

I was stunned... Five men down in one lousy contact.

What was happening to my beloved 3 Commando?

It was a black day indeed.

But it was not as black as the day in June five months later when the commando lost five men - Troopers Francis, Elsaesser, McEnd, Dwyer... and my great friend -Hugh McCall.

I had of course left the commando by then, but I was devastated when I heard the news.

Poor Hugh McCall was killed on the last day of his final bush trip. Only days later he was to have taken his Rhodesian wife and their new baby back to New York where he intended resuming a lucrative acting career.

My heart ached then. It still does.

Hugh was heavily involved in the action near Grand Reef on the 5th January 1979. He wrote a report afterwards, recommending Troopers Bob Smith and Kevin Grace be honoured for bravery.

This was his report.

Statement by Hugh McCall

While deployed on a fireforce operation on 5th January 1979. Stop 6 was put down by helicopter to act as a stop group, there being as yet an undetermined, but obviously large number of terrorists in the contact area.

We moved into the thick bush area to await the arrival of Stop Seven from our rear.

On arrival of Stop Seven at our position, due to the thickness of the bush they walked right onto our position before seeing us. I had to guide them in with a series of low whistles.

Realising we were bunching up, the Stop Seven stick leader, Corporal Hughes, immediately told his men to move to the right and then came towards me to make a plan for our next move.

Stop Seven had turned to move to our right when without warning we were subjected to concentrated automatic weapons fire and grenades from close quarters to our right from an undetermined number of terrorists.

Two members of Stop Seven, Troopers Pilbeam and Wilkens, were grievously wounded and incapacitated by the initial bursts of enemy fire.

One of them fell on top of the other who had gone to ground, and ended up in an antbear hole where he was unable to move, being pinned down by the weight of his wounded comrade and his machinegun. The right hand man of Stop Six, Trooper R G. Smith, at once moved between the wounded and the enemy fire to protect them with total disregard for his own safety.

Smith then put down such rapid and accurate fire that he repulsed the flanking attack before the rest of Stop Six could swing around the wounded to be in a position to help him. Once the remainder of the stick were in a position to help, Trooper Smith, being a trained medic, immediately began to administer first aid to his wounded comrades and prepare them for casevac which had been called for.

He gave the men swift and efficient first aid and assisted or carried them to the casevac helicopter at the LZ which was coming under enemy fire.

Stop Six and the remnants of Stop Seven were then reinforced by Stop Eight and ordered to move forward in a sweep line into the bush to our front. After advancing about one hundred and fifty metres the right flank of the sweep line was subjected to automatic weapons fire, the first burst hitting Smith in the abdomen and exiting through his right buttock, knocking him back down with the force of it.

Due to the thickness of the bush it was difficult to determine the exact position of the enemy. In spite of the severity of his wounds Smith turned over and returned fire. The enemy fire was striking fiercely all around him when Trooper K Grace moved to Smith to pull him back into cover. He did this on his own initiative and with disregard for his own safety.

Trooper Smith seemed to be annoyed that Trooper Grace was risking his life for him and obstinately continued firing.

Trooper Grace was finally able to bring Smith back.

The spirit of Troopers Smith and Grace cheered and heartened the men with their aggression and professionalism. They set a fine example, for the men knew that they would have to go in again with the sweep.

(Signed) Hugh McCall (Sergeant 3-Cdo. 1-RLI)

During the course of this action twenty-seven guerrillas were killed, including three high-ranking commissars.

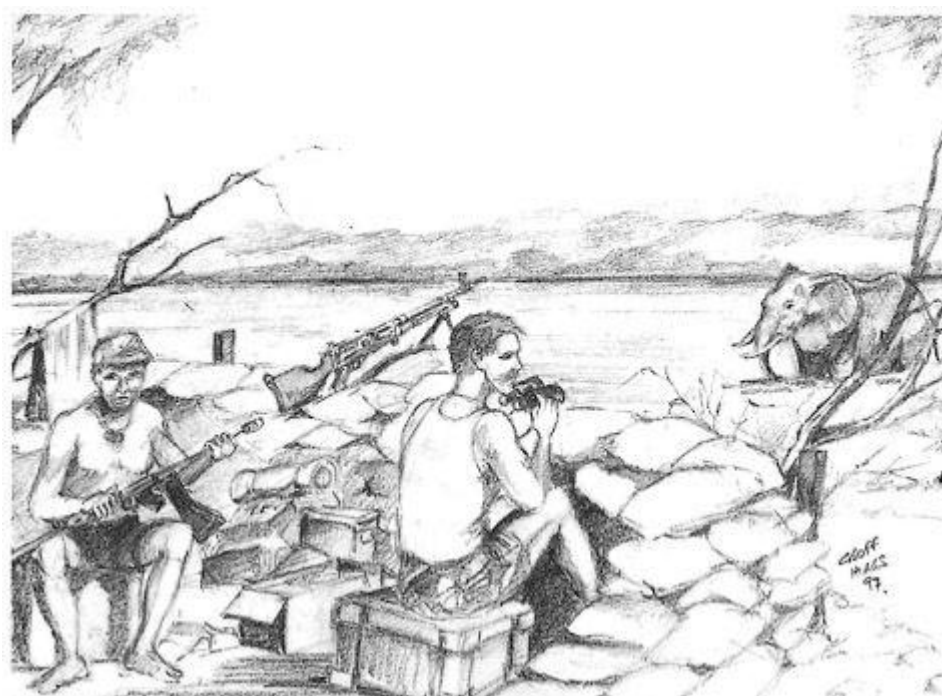
Trooper Grace was awarded the Military Forces Commendation (Operational) for Bravery.

And I didn't forget Hooley's washing.

I had an uncanny feeling that I wasn't able to identify at the time. I knew that had I been directly involved in that contact, I would have been killed. Perhaps it was the overriding fear of having to go into action - or maybe it was premonition. I don't know. All I know is that as darkness fell and I'd retrieved Hooley's washing and locked it away in his trunk, I was overcome with a massive feeling of serenity. I'd survived a few more hours - another day. They couldn't touch me in the safeness of the night.

I dreamed that night of the wounded and dead in the helicopter. The pilot calm and unemotional - alone without his technician who had given his place to one of the wounded. I dreamed of the blood awash on the floorboards, slopping around the pasty corpse of Brad Little, already stiff in death. The eyes were open, staring upwards into nothingness. Of Hooley's soft moaning, as he clenched my hand - a beacon of familiarity. Of Pilbeam's silence, his mummified head shrouded in bloody bandages. He'd been sitting as straight as a ramrod. Of Bob Smith, doubled over into his gut wound, grimacing silently.

I had been in the army longer than any of them. Why not me dead on the floor? My comrades.....



CHAPTER 38

The Cheetah

Excerpts from 'The Cheetah' Magazine

LOVERS (NEW, OLD & STALE)

The O/C Major Bruce Snelgar is at present recovering from proptosis (bulging eyeballs) having just spent 10 days observing the delights of the topless beaches in the Seychelles.

The 2 I/C Lt. Roger Carloni B.C.R is still 'hassling' with the Minister of Finance about the unnerving and unprecedented rising cost of 'Crunchie' bars.

The C.S.M WO.2 Terry Miller is returning to his old pastures at the School of Infantry (Hooterville). We thank him for his creditable service with the Lovers and wish him well in his new post. The acting C.S.M and appointed C.Q.MS C/Sgt. Brian Lewis is now striking a rather ridiculous posture with chefs hat and pace stick.

Cpl. Basil 'the Beep' Dippenaar the M.T Rep has taken the plunge and married the beautiful Joanne Van Biljoen. He is still smirking and gloating about his good fortune.

We welcome to the Cdo. two 'wet behind the ears' subalterns 2 Lts. Noel Smee 13 Troop and Bob Harrison 11 Troop. Once again we have to go through the dismal and time-consuming exercise of convincing Hootervillians that there is a war on. -2 Lt. 'Snot Box' Greenhalgh, that fearless 12 Tp. leader is still trying to arrange his girlfriend, rugby and soldiering in the correct order of priority.

Sgt. Charlie Norris' bank balance is now looking a little healthier after receiving the Troop Commander's acting allowance for 14 Troop.

OBITUARIES

The Cdo. records with deep regret the death in action of 2 Lt. Chappie Rosenfels. Chappie, in his short service with the Lovers, proved to be a most courageous soldier and a well respected officer. He was killed whilst moving forward to assist a wounded man during a fireforce contact. Our deepest sympathy to the Rosenfels. It is also with deep regret that we record the death in action of Trooper Brad Little. Brad was killed in a fireforce action in which 27 terrorists were accounted for. He was always proud of his English heritage but fought as a brave and dedicated soldier for Rhodesia.

LOVERS' NEWS

The Cdo. secured yet another record for the number of kills in a two-week bush trip by killing 65 Charlie Tangos - their last tango in Umtali! We believe that 1 Cdo. is hot on the trail of our other record of 84 terrorists and we wish them luck and good hunting. We will send you a few crates if you manage to break the record.

In the past four months we have been victims of the COMOPS T shirt slogan: 'Join the Army and travel to exotic places etc. etc' At present we are trying to locate the spy within the Cdo. who arranges our timely moves from one side of the country to the other. As soon as we have established calm and lapsed into normal soldiering routine, we then have to up sticks and move. Nevertheless we are all now authorities on Rhodesiana

LOVERS' LAMENT

Herewith the latest in Lovers' vibes and verse. (Sung to the 'Mull of Kintyre').

Far have I travelled
On land and through sky
Dark are the mountains the valleys are green
And oh how our colours fly higher than high
We are the men of the RL.I.

Chorus

RL.I. You fought for your country
To see them survive was all that was needed
Oh RL.I.

Now one lay wounded
He's so far from home
And all the troopies they pray for his soul
As his life leaves him
He sees a heavenly choir
Then they carry him back to RL.I.

Chorus

Now as they give your country away
Fear not my brother, there will come one more day
When we'll be called on to give our last fight
For we are men of the green and white.

TIT BITS

The following members of the National Service cave-fighting squad have handed in their cave-fighting equipment and become regular soldiers: Tprs. Bezuidenhout, Chance and Foulds.

Tpr. Derek Bowhay has gone to R.I.C to improve his knowledge of the indigenous people and their dances.

L/Cpl. Bruce 'Stamp the left foot in' Kidd has now passed the Long Drill and Weapons' Course and has been promoted to T/Cpl. It all goes to show you can fool some of the people some of the time.

Commiserations to 12 Troop on the return of that yellow people-eater L/Cpl. Connelly after his bout of hepatitis - likewise to 14 Tp. on the return of Sgt. Charlie Norris from his yellow vacation.

Tpr. Jerry Smeiman wasn't able to flex sufficiently and therefore opted to go to 13 Tp.

Welcome to the Jewish alliance of Cpl. 'Honourable' Cohen and Tpr. 'Can you spare a shell' Cohen.

LOVERS' NEWS

We wish the rapid recovery of our wounded Lovers - Tpr. Ray Wilkens, L/Cpl. Neil Hooley and Tpr. Bob Smith.

We are happy to announce that L/Cpl. 'Pugsley' Gibson is one piece again after his attempt to stop a 7.62 intermediate.

Tpr. Mark Pilbeam who was blinded in a contact has recently gone to St. Dunstons, England. Our thoughts are with him.

Tpr. Greg van Alstein who 'whinged' continually about never being involved in 'a scene' ended up in Andrew Fleming with numerous gunshot wounds. We wish him a rapid recovery.

Cpl. 'Bubble' Warren is only just recovering from his recent posting to RPs. Congratulations to L/Cpl. Theo Malan on his marriage to Lynne. Happiness is a beautiful wife. It is rumoured that 'Bubble' is getting engaged to the 'Great White'.

Congratulations to the following aspiring Army Comds. on receiving their first tape. L/Cpls. Fergus O'Brien, 'Cane Rat' Connelly, 'Pugsley' Gibson, 'Budgie' Holmes, 'Ouzo' Oosterhuizen.

Tpr. Burrows has gone A.W.O.L - we hope he is freezing to death in his native England. Tpr. McGrath is back with the Hell's Angels on extended, ungranted leave. Tpr. Dirk Schellewart is back from his A.W.O.L stint in Belgium. \$60 for 6 months is not bad going.

Unfortunately we lost three excellent stick commanders on completion of their contracts. Namely L/Cpls. Chris Cocks, Trevor MacIllwaine and Gavin Fletcher - they were a credit to the Cdo. and we wish them happy ducking in P.A.T.U.

Tex Morgan has finally learnt how not to wake up with a hangover - by not going to sleep.

Tpr. Stewart is not A.W.O.L. He has just forgotten to come to work.

The Cheetah Magazine adequately highlighted the close-knit unit that was the RLI. Its primary role. With its jocular banter and assumed bonhomie, it made light of the horrors of the war. It was not conceived to describe how the soldiers had died - certainly not the graphic details. As a newsletter it

was unable to portray the smell of death. Nor was it its place - after all the magazine would be read by mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.

January 1979 was a good month for the RLI. Only two men died on operations. Several got shot through the head or in the guts, but only two died. It was like Captain Donald said on the death of Trooper da Costa back in November 1976. 'You can't go down in the doldrums because one man was killed.' I guess he was right. Yes - live with the images of death, live with the smells, but don't ever get into the doldrums. Just like that.

More than any other sensory recollection, it is the smell that lingers. That smell of fresh, sweet blood, the smell of intestines scattered in the dust with a feeding swarm of blue flies buzzing lazily and unafraid. The smell of excrement on a corpse. The chemical smells of frantan, phosphorus, plastic explosive, cordtex, powder and diesel. Of onions and garlic. Of marijuana and beer. Of sweat and semen and urine. You will never escape the smells.



CHAPTER 39

End of my War in the RLI

O

n the 19th January 1979, Nicholson brought in another head. The major was forever complaining that SB never had enough intelligence to go on. SB wanted captures, it wanted documents, it wanted bodies to identify. But to the troops, this was a hassle and certainly of secondary importance to the ‘proper’ task at hand of killing. So to appease the major, Nicholson had hacked off a guerrilla’s hands (for the fingerprints) and the guerrilla’s head (for the photograph). Back at Grand Reef, he had pulled the three body parts out of his kidney pouches and had tossed them at the major’s feet. Lieutenant Rosenfels had vomited violently.

On the 20th January 1979, the commando returned to Salisbury for R and R and my fighting days with the battalion were over.

In my heart I was greatly relieved.

No more tensions, no more fears, no more mind-sapping, heart-pumping adrenaline.

No more would the callout siren sear into the depths of my soul.

No more the terror of the RPG-7s, or the crump of mortars, or the crackle of SKSs and AK-47S.

For a moment though, I felt a pang of remorse. I was going and my comrades were still carrying on.

But as the convoy of lumbering Unimogs and Mercedes 4.5s rumbled out of the commando gates at the start of the next 3 Commando bush trip, I heaved a sigh of relief and sank down into a squatting position on the asphalt. It was finished.

‘How’s the clearing going, corporal?’

It was the new clerk. He was referring to my clearance from the battalion.

‘It’s not’

“When are you going to start?”

‘I don’t know. I don’t know where to start.’

I stubbed out my cigarette and lit another.

‘Oh. Well come with me and I’ll give you all the forms and show you what to do.’

I followed him gratefully to the Orderly Room where he produced the necessary forms, all of them requiring signatures.

‘Get all those signed and you’re out the army. But don’t forget they have to be signed in the correct order.’

The list seemed endless. It had taken only one signature to get me into the army. About forty were demanded to get me out.

For three days I roamed the battalion like a lost soul in torment, searching out the important people I needed to sign my pieces of paper. I found the Quartermaster, the Orderly, the Signaller, the Caterer, the Doctor (he signed after giving me another medical), the Adjutant, the Paymaster, the O/C Training Troop, the PT Instructor, the MT Officer and what seemed like dozens of others.

Finally, I had enough signatures to fill an autograph book and only one more was needed - Major Snelgar’s.

‘Don’t worry, corp.’ said the friendly clerk, ‘he’s due back this afternoon for an orders group and he can sign then.’

I heaved a thankful sigh.

I was dressed in civilian clothes as I had handed in all my kit. Apart from one signature I was a civilian again.

I ambled over to the mess and pecked disinterestedly at lunch.

Afterwards I sat by the major’s door for nearly two hours until I was rewarded by the sound of his truck stopping outside.

I stood up as the major strode in.

‘Ah, Chris, what are you doing here? I thought you were long gone.’

‘No sir, I’m waiting for your signature.’

He beckoned, and I followed him into his office.

He took the papers from me, sat down at his desk and glanced briefly through them. Then he took a pen from his pocket.

He was about to sign, then hesitated and looked up.

‘Look, Chris, I would like you to reconsider. Are you sure you’re doing the right thing? You’re a damned good soldier. I’ll have you made up to sergeant if you stay’

‘No, sir,’ I said, ‘I’ve made up my mind. I want to go.’

‘Do you have a job to go to?’

‘No, sir. I’ll have to find one.’

He grimaced. ‘Very well, if that’s the way you want it.’

He signed with a flourish.

‘You know you’ll always be welcome back?’

Thank you, sir.’

He stood up and shook my hand.

‘All the best and good luck’

Sadly our gallant major was killed eight months later in a helicopter crash, just before a major cross-border operation into Moçambique. He was one of the finest K-car commanders the RLI had had.

I was now officially a civilian, and I suddenly felt alien in my own unit. I had to get away from the place.

I returned to the barrack-room and packed my personal possessions, then began my last long walk to the battalion gates.

A squad of new recruits was on the drill square and I watched them as I walked, listening to the bawling and shouting of the instructors.

It took me back three years to when I was a recruit.

Enmeshed in dull, aching memories I reached the gates.

The RPs barely looked up as I walked around the boom and out to the waiting taxi, and suddenly as I got in I felt the weight of fifty years lifting.

Perhaps it was because I was still only twenty-one.



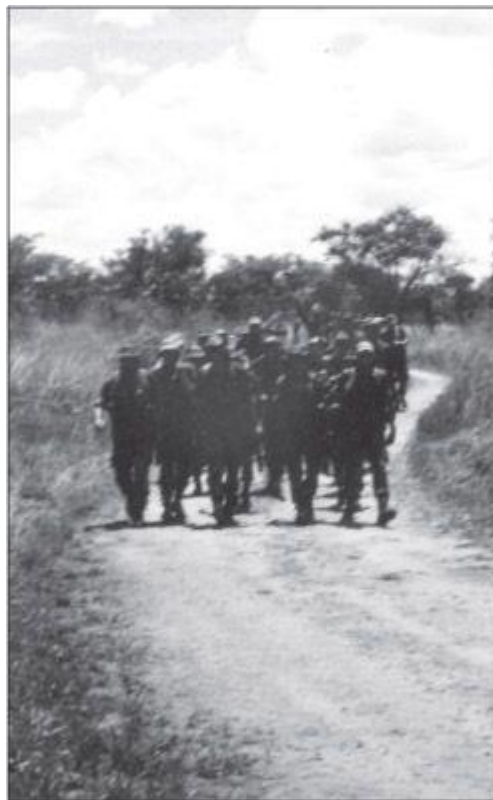
P. K. van der Byl, the Rhodesian Minister of Defence, inspects RLI Intake No. 150 passing-out parade. The author is third from right.



Change parade—recruits' course.



3 Commando barracks.



Route march on '120-miler' during COIN training.



RLI Intake 150 passes out, May 1976.



Recruit Tom Argyle on '120-miler' during COIN training.



The author (left) and Charlie Norris relax on R & R, 1976.



Looking east across the haze of the Honde Valley towards Mozambique. Hill 31 looms in the middle distance.



Troops relaxing at base camp. Honde Valley, 1976.



Tprs Joe Haasbroek (left) and Russell Lieberman relax in their shell-scape.
Gona re Zhou, winter 1976.



Smoke break and brew-up on patrol.



MAG gunner Marius Marais in a victorious mood.



On patrol in the Honde Valley, 1976. Pete Grant is the MAG gunner, Trevor Schoultz the stick leader (centre) and Steve Prowse the rifleman.



Stick leader Charlie Norris on the radio, sending his sitrep. Gona re Zhou, winter 1976.



13 Troop MAG gunner fords a stream. This was taken before camo cream became standard operational procedure.



11 and 14 Troops—Basic Static Line Parachute Course No. 67. New Sarum, January/February 1977.

Back row (left to right): Tprs Dave Simpson, 'Pops' Berry, Dave Donkin, Murray Gibbs, Fergus O'Brien, Doug Loader, Chris Cocks and 'Goss' Condon.

Middle row (left to right): L/Cpl Pete Garnett, Tprs J. Geldenhuys, Spiro Simeonides, Pete Grant, C/Sgt Waite (PJI RhAF), Tpr D. Soares, L/Cpls Graham Hutley, Trevor Schoultz and Charlie Norris.

Seated (left to right): Sgt Tidman (PJI RhAF), Cpl 'Lightie' Taylor, Sgt Keith Bartlett, 2-Lt Rod Smith, Sqdn Ldr D. de Kock (OC PTS), 2-Lt Gordon Thornton, unknown PJI, C/Sgt Johnny Norman.

Front: Tpr Chris Barnard.



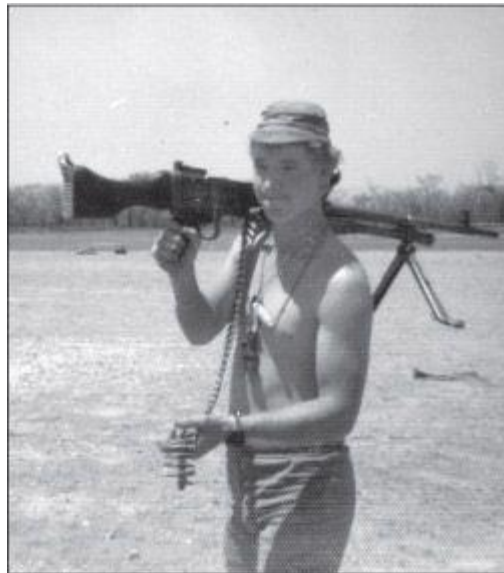
Troopers Chris Cocks (left) and Willie Stratford en route to Mount Darwin, May 1976. The author, still a 'fresh poes', wears regulation dress, while Willie Stratford, a veteran by then, wears non-issue T-shirt and balaclava.



Trevor Schoultz drags on his Madison and Graham van Biljon looks cool beside his MAG, both in distinctly macho pose (note the suntan lotion). Grand Reef, 1976.



NATO MAG and Communist RPD machine-guns, the latter with the drum feed. Both are fine weapons, with the RPD being lighter and more manoeuvrable, but, given the chance, an RLI machine-gunner would rarely have traded his solidly reliable MAG for an RPD.



The author posing with his MAG. Grand Reef, 1976. Around his neck hang his dog tags and morphine phials. His combat cap, commonly known as a 'cunt' cap has been modified beyond issue recognition. The cumbersome neck flap has been cut off and the peak shortened and squashed down in the manner of a Confederate soldier (the desired effect).



13 Troop gunner with mounted MAG on a 2.5 Mercedes Unimog. Preparation for raid on Rambanayi, Mozambique, 1976.



Steve Prowse poses at the door of hut that has presumably been cleared. Certainly the local children seem unfazed.



L/Cpl Pete Garnett takes a bead with his favourite weapon—an FN automatic shotgun—outside the A-frame barrack rooms of Grand Reef, 1976.



The author (left) and Charlie Norris study their map. Gona re Zhou, winter 1976.



Hugh McCall carrying his parachute into a PTS hangar, New Sarum. In the background is Bob 'Shoulders' Smith.



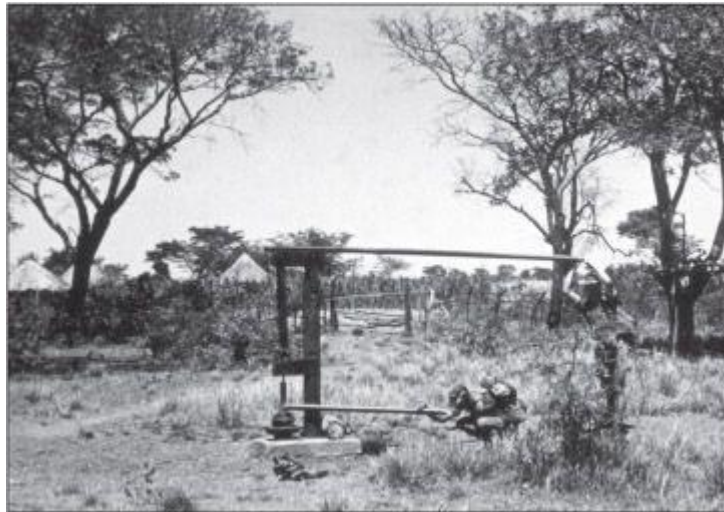
Weapons haul from Battle of Hill 31. Honde Valley, November 1976.



A few of the 11 Troop, 3 Commando soldiers after the Battle of Hill 31 in which 32 guerrillas were accounted for. Standing (left to right): Tprs Dave Peebles, Phil Prosser, Pete Grant, Graham Hutley. L/Cpl Bob Smith, Tprs Paddy Berry and Steve Prowse. In front are Sgt Laurie Ryan, the 4RR tracker who initiated the contact and Tpr Willie Smit with the MAG. Laurie Ryan was tragically killed in a hunting accident shortly after the war.



Trooper Stander in his foxhole, well camouflaged apart from the toothy grin.



A patrol draws water from a village pump.



Digging a bunker at a fireforce base. Bending over to see if it's got any deeper is 'Taff' Troddyn. Looking on are Tprs Tilston and Loader. The vehicle is a mine-proofed 'Crocodile' troop carrier.



Shoultz, with the cup of tea, and Cocks, exhausted on their return from Rambanayi. Both are still daubed with camo cream.



Schoultz and pet rabbit.



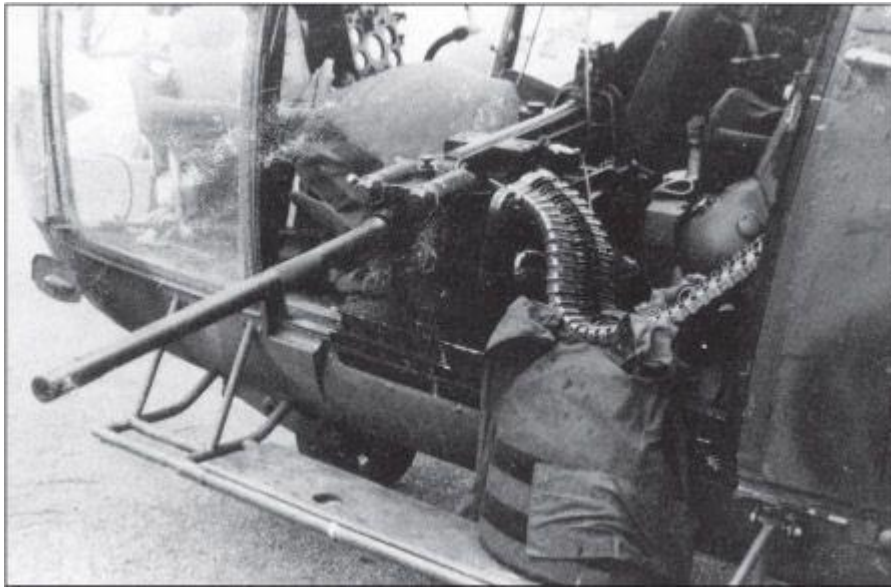
Trooper Krause takes five from OP duties.



Cpl 'Lightie' Taylor (at right) and his 13 Troop stick return from a successful fireforce contact near Mount Darwin in which eight ZANLA guerrillas were killed. Tpr Soares is smiling on the left.



RLI troops straddling a path, observe an airstrike.



20mm Hispano cannon mounted on Alouette K-car gunship.



Boerie Hume becomes an officer, much to the delight of his partner.



The author, photographed by a *Herald* reporter, after his first parachute training jump. New Sarum, January 1977.



The slow-flying, heavily armed Lynx—an integral, crucial facet of any fireforce action.



Rhodesian Army Medical Corps

CERTIFICATE

OF

MEDICAL TRAINING

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

Army No. 108343 Rank Rfn

Name Cocks

having undergone a course of instruction in the following subjects:

Basic Anatomy & Physiology; Trauma & Regional Injuries;

Advanced First Aid, Common Complaints and their treatment;

Basic Pharmacology

*and passed written, oral and practical examinations as set by an
approved trade testing board with an aggregate of 85% is now
qualified as a Troop Medical Orderly*

10.9.76

Date of examination

[Signature] Colonel
Director of Medical Services



The RLI on parade. The turnout and drill of the commandos matched that of elite units anywhere in the world.



The RLI colours on parade.

This sequence of four photographs shows the commencement of a fireforce deployment out of Grand Reef during 1976.



Stop 3, an 11 Troop stick, awaits uplift on the runway at dawn. From Tprs Graham van Biljon (MAG gunner), Chris Cocks and Dave Peebles listen to a final briefing from stick leader L/Cpl Pete Garnett.



Stop 3 emplanes to Yellow 3.



Yellow 3 taxiies fortake-off.



Yellow Section scrambles.



An Alouette chopper tech, the helicopter gunner-technician, checks for hidden obstacles on landing in a fireforce LZ.



Temporary base camp in the bush. Rhodesian camouflage patterns were highly effective.



Alouettes parked at a fireforce base.



3 Commando batmen, Reggies and Geronimo, prepare dinner in trying conditions.



The vastness of the Rhodesian battlefield.



The end of the road for a ZANLA guerrilla.



Bush camp in the Zambezi Valley.



A typical rat pack.



Graze queue. 'Pugsley' Gibson with hands on hips. Dave Bain is on the extreme right.



The WVS Forces' canteen in Hartley.



Grand Reef Forward Airfield (FAF)—the Blue Jobs' accommodation.



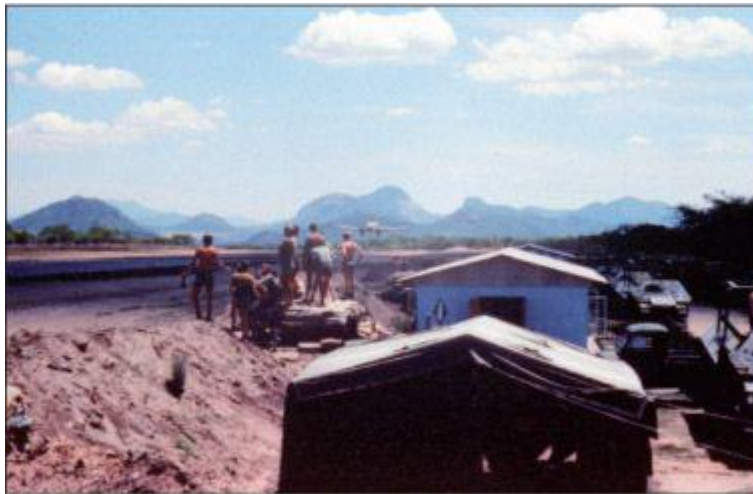
Fireforce Dakota at Grand Reef.



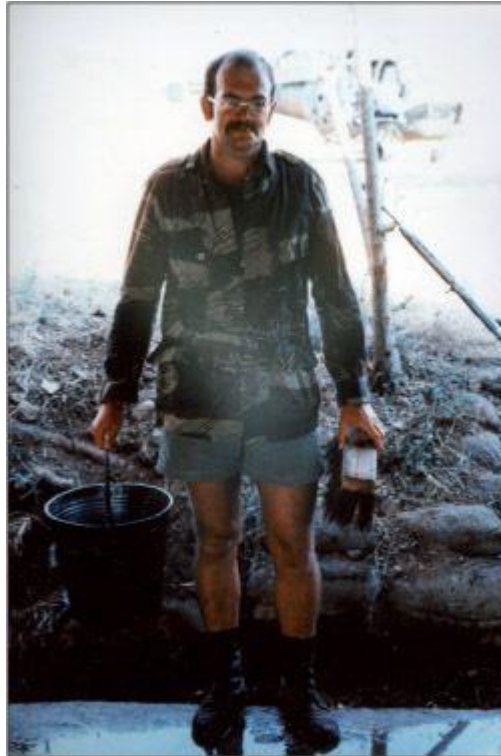
3 Commando paras—airborne!



Despatchers check over paras' equipment prior to boarding. Gerry Smeiman reclines on his rifle front left. Basil Dippenaar (in shorts) and Dave Greenhalgh are approaching at back left.



A fireforce Dakota returns from a drop. Grand Reef, 1978.



Tom Argyle on latrine duties.



Morning ablutions in a very wet Zambezi Valley.



Charlie Norris and Commando Quartermaster C/Sgt Brian Lewis mess down.



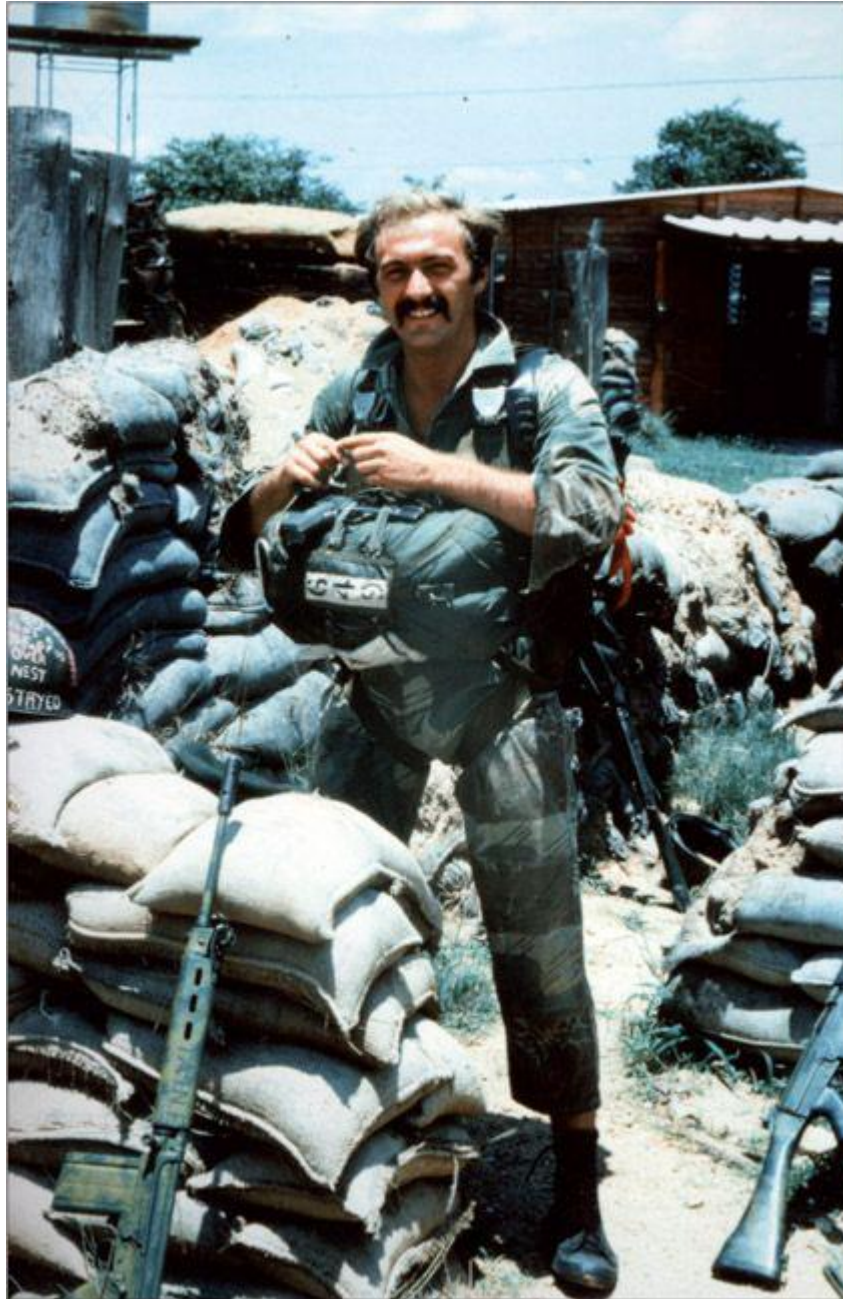
C/Sgt John Coleman alights from a 'Crocodile' for some refreshment.



Malcolm Nicholson reclines over the barrels of the twin Brownings on an Alouette G-car.



Tom Argyle outside a rather unkempt Grand Reef bunker.



George Galloway poses at Grand Reef in full para harness, 1978. All weapons were by now painted with camo paint.



Tpr Burrows brews up on a long-range patrol in Mozambique. By 1978 the Bergen backpack (behind) had become standard issue.



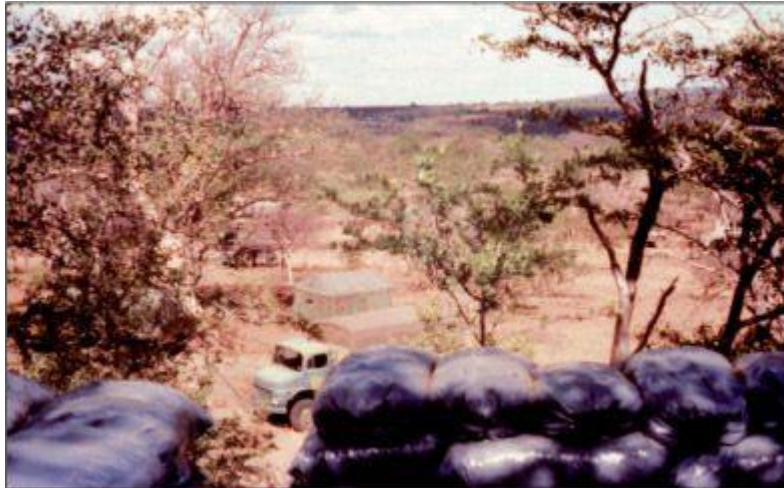
11 Troop stick on the lush Sabi River floodplain. From Tpr Kevin Grace, L/Cpl George Galloway, L/Cpl Frank Neave and Tpr Tom Argyle carrying the MAG.



Motorised advance into Mozambique.



Tpr Bob Smith from Georgia, USA in an SAS 12.7mm gun emplacement, overlooking the Zambezi River at Dekka.



3 Commando base camp at Deka. Zambezi Valley, 1978.



John Coleman's 11 Troop stick at Deka, Zambezi Valley, having returned from a deep-penetration mission into Zambia, 1978.

Back row from Chris Cocks (in Tarzan pose), Malcolm Nicholson, 'Taff' Troddyn, Alistair Adamson and Neil Hooley.

Front from Harry Botes, Simon Mesham, John Coleman and Bob Smith (the Yank one).



L/Cpl Chris Cocks's stick 'takes five' during a sweep up the Sabi River, 1978.



The author (smoking at left) and his stick, including two RAR soldiers, reach their objective—Birchenough Bridge—after an arduous 50-kilometre sweep up the Sabi River, October 1978. The lady with the parasol is unimpressed.



And a happy Christmas to you too! from Butch, Budgie, Grant and Frank.

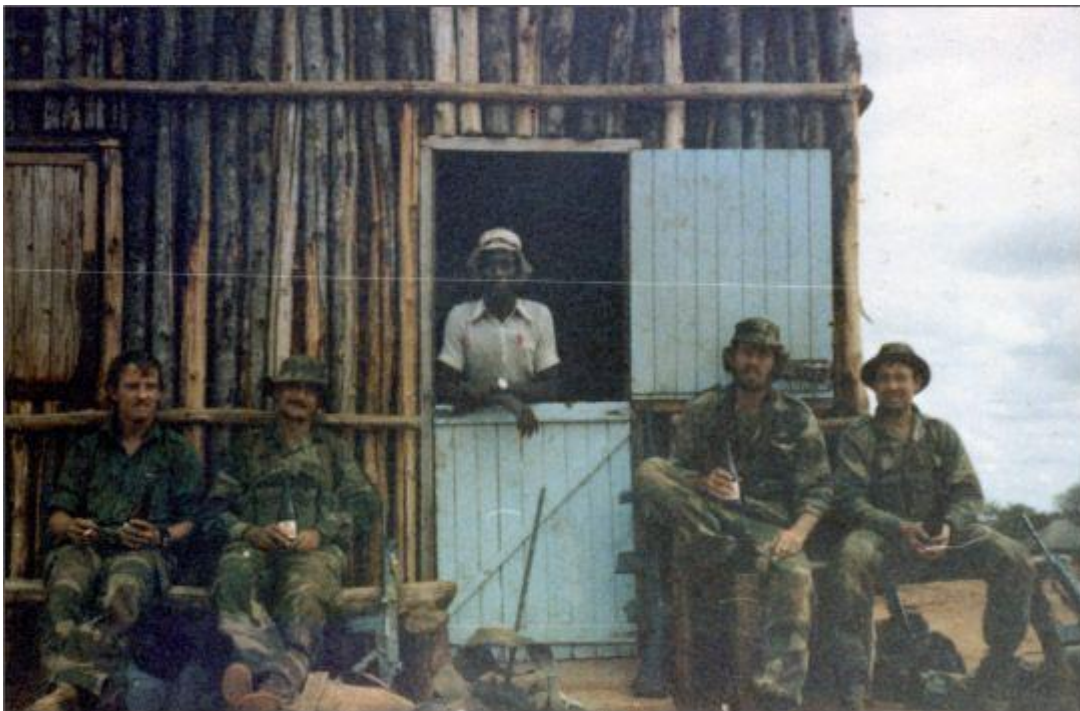


Near the Great East Road. L/Cpl Chris Cocks adjusts his A76 radio after the battle at CGT-2 ZIPRA guerrilla base camp in Zambia, October 1978. His camo cream has sweated off and he wears a

ZIPRA hat, taken as a souvenir from the raid. The radio pouch and webbing are also of Communist origin.



The author turns 21 and blows out the candles on his 3 Commando cake! Salisbury, November 1978.



The author (at left, wearing a strictly non-standard-issue guerrilla shirt) takes time out with a congenial shebeen host and Middle Sabi PATU operatives Pete Banks, Angus Thompson and Mike Engelbrecht.



Between the legs of a chopper pilot—this one with cowboy boots.



3 Commando plaque—The Lovers.



No. 3 Air Despatchers' Course. New Sarum, 1977.

3 Commando personnel are L/Cpls Pete Donnelly (standing centre), Charlie Warren (standing second from right) and Chris Cocks (standing at right).



Corporals Gibson, Hodgson and Foulkes.



Padre Blakeway's cup runneth over at an officers' dining-in night. Dave Greenhalgh and Bobby Graves (at right) share the humour.



Tom Arygle in his 'greens'.



Charlie Norris tries his hand at the controls of a Bell, 1979.



A Hawker Hunter strikes in Mozambique.



Bell helicopter at Kariba.



Major Bruce Snelgar briefs stick leaders prior to a fireforce deployment. Bruce Kidd is in the foreground with headband.



DC-3 Dakota.



14 Troop paras look apprehensive on board a Dakota. From left are Charlie Norris, Bruce MacLean and 'Budgie' Holmes.



A despatcher (right) guides RLI paras during the drop. An earlier photo as the paras still wear the cumbersome 'motor-bike' helmets.



Fireforce para drop near Mtoko, 1978.



Sgt Tony Coom (centre) with guerrilla chest webbing and AK-47 is flanked by Tpr Jerry Stander (left) and John Connelly with the PKM machine-gun. All are dressed in ZIPRA fatigues, having returned from a long-range recce into Zambia.



Fireforce Alouettes refuel during a contact near the main Salisbury—Umtali road. Inyanzura, January 1979.



Alan Palmer-Jones back from a contact, ‘parks off’ on his MAG.



3 Commando paras stand by for callout at a forward airfield. Para kit lies ready to be slipped on at a moment’s notice.



3 Commando and SAS troops regroup after a contact with ZANLA guerrillas in the dense bush of Mozambique.



Cpl Charlie Warren (right) and his MAG gunner check out a dead guerrilla in a maize field.



Neil Hooley (left) and Kevin Grace at Grand Reef, exhausted after a fireforce contact.



3 Commando MAG gunners make ready prior to deployment.



Gavin Fletcher and Jerry Stander.



Paras kitted up and ready.



Carl Oosterhuizen crouches next to an enemy bunker at CGT-2 ZIPRA base camp. Zambia, October 1978. Even though the quality of the photo is poor, his war-weary expression tells the story through his eyes. He committed suicide shortly after the war. RIP Carl.



L/Cpl Chris Cocks squats outside his bivvy at the 3 Commando base at the Middle Sabi club. His Bergen is stacked at left and he's wearing his favourite guerrilla cap



Captain John Cronin, being American, conducts proceedings at a rodeo at Umvukwes Country Club. The Umvukwes farmers had 'adopted' 3 Commando.



Battalion padre Bill Blakeway digs in.



Fireforce Dakota lands on a dirt strip.



Lt Roddy Smith.



3 Commando senior NCOs, 1978.

Back row from Sgt 'Hook' Le Roux, C/Sgt John Coleman, Sgt Martin 'Pudding' Hudson and Sgt Paul Abbott.

Seated from WO2 Ken Reed (the CSM) and C/Sgt Johnny Norman.



Simon Mesham and his girlfriend in the 3 Commando pub, Cranborne Barracks.



3 Commando assault course team—Battalion trophy winners.
Back row from Tprs Paul Furstenburg, Alistair Adamson, Dave Simpson and

....
Seated from Tpr Dave Donkin, L/Cpl Jimmy Gibson, Sgt Derrick Taylor and L/Cpl Percy Hodgson
(absent: the author).

 Image

Retraining exercise at Kariba.

 Image

Neil Hooley (in civvies) and George Galloway in jovial spirits—where else but the 3 Commando
pub.

 Image

Dressing to the right ...

 Image

A farewell to arms. Colonel Buttenshaw salutes.

EPITAPH

Throughout Zimbabwe's Civil War, men of the R.L.I were the bulwark of the thin line which stood between order and anarchy. Now the regiment is to be disbanded and the 'Invincibles' will soon hand in their weapons and go then separate ways. But in the memories of fighting men all over the world, The Saints Go Marching On.

(Extract from Scope Magazine)

The other day I signed letters of congratulations to the latest three Saints receiving the Bronze Cross of Rhodesia. I read their citations and looking at my old green and white stable belt some of their glory seemed to run off on this old soldier. On the same day a bit of bump reminded me that my old mate and Adjutant, Bruce Snelgar, had joined the ranks of gallant Saints who aren't with us any more.

I sat at the dreaded desk and wondered about two things. First, does the country know what it owes to the R.L.I. and secondly, what will be the verdict of history on our Regiment?

My answer to the first question is, 'I doubt it' Sure, they know that where the going is toughest that's where you'll find the R.L.I, but perhaps they don't understand fully what that means. However in regard to my second question I'd say, 'One day they will know what they owe the R.L.I.' - for my bet is that history will say that the R.L.I trooper was the equal, if not the peer, of the British para, the American marine, the German storm-trooper or Napoleon's Imperial Guard. I will always be proud to say, 'I was one of them O's.'

(Maj.General A.N.O. MacIntyre O.L.M., D.C.D., writing for Cheetah Magazine.)

On the 31st October 1980, the R.L.I will cease to exist'

(General Sandy McLean, Zimbabwe Army.)

EPILOGUE

I sit at my desk and take another sip of brandy. It's nearly midnight and at last the book is finished. I feel very tired but I've written it all down. Has it been worth it, I wonder? Who really cares anyway?

I was told two weeks ago by a literary agent that no one gives a damn now. Perhaps it was arrogant and self-centred to have written a book about oneself... 'You must stop analysing your own thoughts,' he said. 'No one cares about them.'

But you do, and maybe that's why you keep going. You can't let go.

'It's too old to be of current interest and too recent to be of any historical value,' he said. Does that mean then that the whole thing, even the war itself, was a waste of time?

Perhaps. But the symptoms are always there. A few of my army buddies, the ones who went through it with me, are still around. But the worst thing you can be is sentimental. Forget it. It's gone. Like Schoultz, who like so many didn't quite make it in one piece. Even if he is still alive.

Everything feels so empty suddenly and I just don't understand. It wasn't Vietnam, it wasn't the Falklands. So what's the big deal?... 'Don't try to make something out of nothing,' he said. 'Most people don't even know where Rhodesia was and care less.'

Perhaps he's right. Don't make something out of nothing.

It's past midnight now. As I light a last cigarette I resolve that this weekend I will go and visit Schoultz.

Chiredzi. May 13th, 1987

Appendix 1

Record of CM. Cocks' Training and Operational Parachute Descents

Following is the record taken from my log book of all my parachute jumps. Out of a total of 42 jumps, 18 were operational jumps - i.e. combat jumps. The key below will assist the reader with the abbreviations used:



Image

Log of Parachute Descents



Image

Appendix 2

Operational Orders for Security Forces' Assault on ZANLA Forces' Base Camp at Chimoio, Moçambique - 23 NOVEMBER 1977.

OPERATION DINGO

TOP SECRET

SIT

1. **ENFORCES**

- a. Consist of FPLM, TPDF and approx 100 Russian/Cuban advisors. Tanks/armoured cars have been reported in CHIMOIO TOWN, but this cannot be substantiated.
- b. No known air threat is present.
- c. AA wpns consist of 14.5, 12.7 and Strella missiles.

2. **BREAKDOWN**

Troop dispositions, strengths and reaction times are as follows:



Image

CHIMOIO TERRORIST BASE

3. Functions

- a. ZANLA Ops HQ
- b. ZANLA Admin HQ
- c. ZANLA Log HQ
- d. ZANLA Trg Centre
- e. MANICA Prov HQ

4. Total Strength

- a. Trained ters 2 000
- b. Ters under trg 1 000
- c. Hosp orderlies 1 200
- d. FPLM elements 80
- e. Miscellaneous 200

5. Dispositions

The base is made up of 18 complexes all containing ters with a small element of FPLM for control purposes. All complexes have at least six guards on by day and night.

(PASINDINA 2) a. Complex L WQ 522033 (This tgt will be struck at H-Hour).

- i. Description - 66 Pole and Dagga structures laid out in rows to form a rough box shaped area.
- ii. Function - to house trained convalescent ters.
- iii. Numbers - up to 400 including 4 FPLM

(TAKAWIRA 1) b. Complex J WQ 540045 (This tgt is a K-Car tgt)

- i. Description - This complex is made up of two camps known as Matopos and Takawira 1. It has 70 structures, all of which are Pole and Dagga.
- ii. Function - Matopos complex houses the Registry, Takawira complex houses semi-trained ters, recruits awaiting transport to selected external trng camps.
- iii. Numbers - up to 500 or more depending on Rct numbers and 4 - 6 FPLM.

(PASINDINA 1) c. Complex K WQ 541050 (This tgt is a K-Car tgt)

- i. Description - This is a small camp containing 19 structures, all Pole and Dagga.
- ii. Function - houses the limbless ters ex Rhodesia.
- iii. Numbers - up to 70 and 4 - 6 FPLM.

(HQ) d. Complex H WQ 545042 (This tgt is first priority at H-Hour).

- i. Description - This is the HQ area and is the most important tgt in the whole base. The area includes 10 metal roofed buildings, 41 large thatched bldgs and 49 small structures.
- ii. Function - houses the hierarchy and is the main office and clerical area.

iii. Numbers - up to 200 and 4 - 6 FPLM.

e. Engineers Complex WQ 545040 (This tgt is a K-Car tgt).

i. Description - This is a small camp containing 12 bldgs, all Pole and Dagga

ii. Function - to house the engineers responsible for the maintenance of the HQ Complex.

iii. Numbers - up to 70 and 4 - 6 FPLM.

f. Complexes M. C. D. B. From WQ 551036 to WQ 559040. (This tgt is second priority at H-Hour).

i. Description - This area is taken up by five complexes, all made of Pole and Dagga huts. These complexes are all inter-joining, therefore it has been considered as one tgt area.

ii. Function -

(a) Complex M - Chitepo college where Political Commissars are housed and taught.

(b) Complex D - Parirenyatwa Camp, Chaminuka Camp and the DB. These complexes house the trained and learning nursing staff, the security section and Rhodesian prisoners. MUGABE lives in this area on his visits.

(c) Complex B - Nehanda Camp holds the young ters who are not yet of trng age, and the women.

iii. Numbers -

(a) Chitepo College - 250 and 4 - 6 FPLM

(b) Parirenyatwa Camp - 1200 (700 male, 500 female), 4 - 6 FPLM.

(c) Chaminuka Camp - 500 (ex Peking) and 6 FPLM.

(d) DB - 20 guards (unknown number inside)

(e) Nehanda Camp - Unknown numbers.

(NEW GARAGE) g. Complex A WQ 568042 (This is a K-Car tgt)

i. Description - This is a small camp consisting of three Pole and Dagga bldgs.

ii. Function - A new garage area where long distance drivers and mechanics are housed.

iii. Numbers - 50 and 4 - 6 FPLM.

(OLD GARAGE) h. Complex P WQ 557051 (This is a K-Car tgt)

- i. Description - This area consists of 1 large open sided metal roofed bldg and 29 small Pole and Dagga bldgs.
 - ii. Functions -
 - (a) Fuel Dump (underground)
 - (b) Ammo Store for Rct Camp
 - (c) Vehicle graveyard
 - (d) Tool Store
 - iii. Numbers - up to 70 and 4 - 6 FPLM
- (NGANGAS) j. Complex Q WQ 561054 (This is a K-Car tgt)
- i. Description - The area consists of 88 informally set out Pole and Dagga huts.
 - ii. Function - to house the Ngangas and old people.
 - iii. Numbers - Unknown.
- (NATIONAL STORES) k. Complex R WQ 569051 (This is a K-Car tgt)
- i. Description - This complex is made up of an old tobacco barn and 53 Pole and Dagga huts plus 5 bell tents. It has a bulldozed fire break encircling it.
 - ii. Function - This is the main ZANLA Logistics Centre and contains food, clothing and ammunition.
 - iii. Numbers - Up to 150 and 4 - 6 FPLM with a guard on a boom on both entrance and exit.
- (THIN CAMP) l. Complex S WQ 574048 (This is a K-Car tgt).
- i. Description - This area consists of 12 small Pole and Dagga huts.
 - ii. Function - to house "thin" recruits.
 - iii. Numbers - Unknown, but could be as many as 150 and 4 - 6 FPLM.
- (RCTS CAMP) m. Complex T WQ 571089 (This tgt will be struck at H-Hour).
- i. Description - This area consists of 33 barrack huts, 43 small huts, 3 bell tents and a kitchen area.
 - ii. Function - This area is the main Rct Training Camp.
 - iii. Numbers - Up to 1000 Rcts, 25 instructors, 6 FPLM

TARGET PRIORITY H-Hour - Complexes H, MCDB, T, thereafter K-Cars orbit over selected complexes.

FRIENDLY FORCES

1 RLI

1. Provide the following:
 - a. 48 Troops para role after air strike
 - b. 48 Troops para role reserve
 - c. 40 Troops heli role
 - d. 20 Troops heli assy area prtn
 - e. 16 Troops Adm base prtn. This to include one 81 mm mor and team
 - f. 1 Doctor and 3 Med Orderlies

SAS

2. Provide the following:
 - e. 16 Troops para role after air strike
 - b. Para role reserve (approx 30 men)

AIRFORCE

3. The mission is predominantly air strike supported by ground forces.
Following support will be aval, subject to serviceability:
 - a. 7 Hunters
 - b. 4 Vampires
 - c. 7 Dakotas
 - d. 1 DC8
 - e. 1 DC7
 - f. 4 Lynx
 - g. 4 Canberras
 - h. 31 Helicopters (including Pol)
4. Three Offrs to provide control at the following locs:
 - a. Grand Reef (normal FAF comd)
 - b. Heli assy area
 - c. Adm base
5. Technical recovery teams and an armourer to be aval Grand Reef.

SPECIAL BRANCH

6. 4 man SB team for immed int gathering in camp area. This team to provide prisoner and body identification.

7. Further two teams may posn heli assy area as backup. This must include IO SAS and DM1 rep in first back up team.

LOG

8. Capt Jackson to be operations log offr.
9. In consultation with QM 1 RLI and OC 3 Air Sup PI you are to staff the following Sup Pt's:
 - a. Grand Reef
 - b. Heli Assy area.
 - c. Adm Base.
10. You are to establish a transit base and security area at New Sarum.
This to be done in liaison with Q Rep Sarum.

MSN

11. To provide ground forces in sp of air attk on ter base camp code name ZI with the following desired effect:
 - a. Killing and capturing max ters
 - b. Int gathering
 - c. Destruction of en war materials
 - d. Capture of selected en war materials such as STRELLA

EXEC

12. General Outline
 - a. Air Strikes to take place against selected en tgts fol by vertical envelopment by para and heli tps.
13. Detailed Tasks
 - a. 1 RLI
 - i. Grouping Nil
 - ii. Task
 - (a) Provide para stops 1 and 2
and heli stops A to J
 - (b) Para sticks area of responsibility GR WQ 523040 to GR WQ 538027 Heli sticks responsibility GR WQ 528046 to WQ 535050.
 - (c) Stick comds to be offr where possible and are to posn in centre of the sticks. One offr in comd, heli tps.
 - b. SAS
 - i. Grouping Nil

ii. Task

(a) Provide Stops 3, 4, 5 and 6

(b) Area of responsibility. Stop 3 WQ 538025 to WQ 546019

Stop 4 WQ 546019 to WQ 558026

Stop 5 WQ 558026 to WQ 568032

Stop 6 WQ 568032 to WQ 578042

(c) Stops to be comd by an offr who is to posn in centre of the stick

(d) Major Graham to be ground forces comd.

c. Action on Landing

i. Paras to get out of harness asp and gp together with any other para immed aval. Take up a posn in best cover, wait and shoot.

ii. Do not spend time trying to regroup into sticks. All paras to attempt to visually locate own forces in close proximity.

iii. Pers on stick extremes namely 1 and 24 para and A, J heli to have white phos readily avail to indicate stick locs.

iv. Note the posn you leave your parachute, reserve and helmet etc.

v. 40 heli tps who have emplaned in heli assy area are to be positioned WEST of the ridge with a responsibility from GR WQ 528046 to GR WQ 535050

vi. Heli tps to be dropped in dead ground to WEST of ridge. Once they have been dropped they are to move towards the tgt and posn on top of the ridge.

viii. Before drop off stick comds to take particular note of stick drop off points on either side,

viii. Offr to be nominated to comd heli sticks.
He is also to be centrally positioned.

d. The Sweep

i. Once the air strikes and K-Car actions are over, all sweep lines will sweep towards and eventually through the tgt area.

ii. The sweep sequence to be given by comd heli.

iii. During the sweep if contact is made and close air sp req a white phos grenade is to be thrown fol by a tgt indication.

iv. Once the outer camp area has been cleared a thorough search of the tgt area is to take place. SB teams will be made aval at this time and will be delivered to the HQ area. Sticks in immd area are responsible for SB prtn.

e. Reorg

- i. After the sweep and search of the area has been completed, sticks to return to their parachutes and recover kit and eqpt left in area.
- ii. G Cars to be sent to assist in parachute loc. Once eqpt collected G Cars to uplift parachutes to adm area.
- iii. Extraction sequence to follow once parachutes cleared. Pers uplifted from camp area to Adm base initially and then to heli assy area. Polo ac to carry out concurrent lift from Adm area to heli assy area.
- iv. Orders for extraction from comd heli on completion of parachute uplift.

f. Adm Area Tps

- i. 16 RLI incl mor and mor team emplanes heli assy area and land at Adm area. Mor team and mor to posn as OP at GR WQ 519290 Adm base loc GR WQ 517290.
- ii. Adm base to establish comms with DC7 and take fuel resup.
- iii. Q element to establish sup Pt.
- iv. Airforce rep to establish refuel point.

14. Special Tasks

a. STOP 1

i. Grouping Nil

ii. Task

- (a) Provide 1 C/S early wng/mining prt & posn on road GR WQ 525037
- (b) You are to lay a centre blast mine to prevent any possible on vehicle interference.

iii. Reorg Remain that loc throughout extraction phase.

b. STOP 5

i. Grouping Nil

ii. Task

- (a) As per Stop 1. Prevent en vehicle interference from EASTERN rd GR WQ 550032.

iii. Reorg Remain that loc throughout extraction phase.

15. Coord Instr

a. D DAY is WED 23 NOV 77 and H HOUR IS 230745B.

b. 1 RLI LAND TAIL To consist of the following:

- i. 48 Para reserve.

- ii. 40 Heli Ops.
- iii. 16 Heli tps incl mor team for Adm area.
- iv. 20 prtn tps for heli assy area. Must incl 4 × 81mm mor tubes and teams.
- v. Q rep to liaise with OC 3 Air Sup Pl.
- iv. SB and med teams.
- viii. Resuscitation team.
- c. Routing
 - i. 3 RLI mov from Sby on D-1
 - ii. 1 RLI paras remain Grand Reef to provide para reserve.
 - iii. D DAY. Fol pers depart Grand Reef for heli assy area:
 - (a) 76 1 RLI
 - (b) SB teams
 - (c) Resuscitation team
 - (d) Med team for Adm area
 - iv. Sufficient vehs on this convoy to be capable of uplifting 150 men after the op.
- d. Heli Assy Area
 - i. Location - Lake Alexander.
 - ii. Comd Air HQ Rep.
 - iii. Function:
 - (a) to establish LZ to cater for 31 heli at one time.
 - (1) Establish Sup Pt. Log Offr to appoint rep
 - (2) Establish Resuscitation medical team. Army HQ to org
 - (3) Provide prtn for fuel and tpt reg for op
 - (4) Hold 4 mor tubes in res
- 16. Sequence of Events and Timings
 - a. D-1 RLI land tail to posn Grand Reef by 221800B. Sup pt to be est by 222359B.
 - b. D-Day. Heli assy area to be functional by no later than 230600B.
 - c. All heli tps ready for uplift by no later than 230600B.
 - d. Air Force rep to ensure stick O's correct. Adm tps separated from heli tps.
 - e. 0430-0500 hrs. Helis carry out phased departure from Salisbury to Assy area.
 - f. 0630-0700 hrs. All 31 Helis refuel at Heli Assy area and pick up tps tgt (10 G Cars).

- g. 0600 hrs. Para Daks airborne from Salisbury.
- h. 0630 hrs. DC7 airborne from Salisbury with fuel.
- j. 0710 hrs. 10 K Cars, 10 G Cars with 40 RLI leave Heli Assy area for tgt.
- k. 0710 hrs. 10 Polo ac leave Heli Assy area for Adm Area. Air rep to ensure SB on board and all Q and ac munitions also on board.
- l. H-Hour 230745B.
 - i. 2 Hunters, 1000 lb bombs on tgt H and M.
 - ii. 1 Hunter Frantan on tgt L.
 - iii. 4 Vampires with 20mm cannon and 60 lb RP on tgt T.
- m. H + 30 secs
 - i. 4 Cans with MK II Frags on fol:
 - (a) 1 Can H
 - (b) 1 Cans M, D and C.
 - (c) 1 Can L.
- n. During period H + 30 secs to H + 5
 - i. 4 Hunters with 68mm rkts and 30mm on AA posns J and B.
- o. H + 2. Paras drop 144 tps on tgt.
- p. H + 5. 10 G Cars deploy 40 RLI on ridge and 10 K Cars attk fol tgts:
 - i. 2 K Cars on H
 - ii. 1 K Car on R.
 - iii. 2 K Cars on T.
 - iv. 2 K Cars on L.
 - v. 1 K Car on P.
 - vi. 2 K Cars on B, D, M and C.
- q. 1 Comd G Car, Comd Dak and 2 Lynx for wide recce and relay overhead. Thereafter cabranking of Hunters and Vampires. Once ac clear the area and rearm and refuel,
- r. Ac standby state to cater for both air-to-air and tk threat,
- s. H + 15. Polo ac arrive Adm area carrying:
 - i Reserve holding all type ammo.
 - ii. 4 SB.
 - iii. 2 Medics.
- t. H + 15. One Polo heli to mark DC7 and take fuel drop. Heli LZ 1 km from fuel DZ until drop completed,

- u. H to H+5 1/2 hrs. Mopping up and closing in of Stop Lines, search of area.
- v. 1645 hrs. All tps clear of tgt area and clear of Moçambique by D + 1 0800 hrs.
- w. Last wave directly to Grand Reef. Thereafter all tps recover to Salisbury by 6 Daks, Heli and rd tpt. This move coord at Grand Reef.

17 General Instructions

- a. No burning is to take place unless the order is given from the Comd Heli.
 - b. During the reorg SB team are to examine the "PIT" and vet captures. These captures are to be taken to the Adm Area asap.
 - c. Every single document or attractive item of eqpt must be handed to SB. Any souvenir hunter will be severely disciplined.
18. Heli positioning and extraction detail see [Appendix A](#)
19. Air Aspects detail [Appendix B](#).

ADM AND LOG

- 20. Pers eqpt per stick see [Appendix C](#).
- 21. Logistic Instruction see Appendix D.
- 22. Ammo holding summary see [Appendix E](#).
- 23. Transport req detailed in [Appendix E](#)
- 24. The above Adm instructions cater for both tasks Z1 and Z2.

COMD AND SIGS

- 25. Air Comd S Force Gp Capt Walsh, deputy Comd Sqn Ldr Griffiths.
- 26. Ground forces Comd Maj Robinson, deputy Comd Maj Graham.
- 27 Substitute Comd Heli Sqn Ldr Griffiths and Maj Graham.
- 28. 3 IC operation 1 RLI Comd.
- 29. Radio discipline is vital to the control of the operation. Only use the battle frequency if the transmission is essential. Make use of the domestic frequencies for sub unit control and co-operation.
- 30. Should a sub unit req air sp or if vital info is to be passed to the Comd that C/S is to change to the battle frequency.
- 31. Each stick comd is to have an addl radio operator close on hand in order to control the domestic net which will be on a different

frequency.

32. Each stick and Sqn will all be allocated domestic frequencies.

33. For net diagram see [Appendix G](#).

34. See sigs Op O Appendix H.

APPENDIX B TO SAS

VERBAL O's

OP DINGO

AIR ASPECTS

PHASE 1

Allocation of Air Effort

1. The following air effort is allocated to the Phase 1 operation:

4 x Canberra

7 x Hunter

6 x Vampire (4 x FB9 2 x Tll)

4 x Lynx

10 x K Car

10 x G Car

10 x G Car (Polo)

1 x G Car (Comd)

6 x Dakota (Para role)

1 x Dakota (Comd)

Rehearsals

2. Co-ordinated rehearsals and training to be conducted by various Squadrons prior to the Air Briefing on Sunday 20th November 1977

Briefing

3. Air briefing to be conducted by DOPS at Rhodesian Air Force New Sarum at 1500 hrs on Sunday 20th November 1977 To be attended by OCFW's New Sarum and Thornhill, Squadron Commanders, Section Leaders and K Car pilots.

Full Air/Ground briefing to be conducted at SAS Model Room at 0900 hrs on Monday 21st November 1977 To be attended by OCFW's, Squadron Commanders and Air HQ reps.

Prepositioning of Aircraft

4. A phased withdrawal of helicopters, Dakota and Lynx aircraft will be conducted and is to be completed by 1800 hrs on Monday 21st November 1977.
5. Vampire aircraft plus supporting services are to position at Rhodesian Air Force New Sarum by 1800 hrs, on Tuesday 22nd October 1977 Movement order and co-ordination to be conducted by OC No. 2 Sqn. Rhodesian Air Force New Sarum to be informed of accommodation requirements.
6. All aircraft with the exception of Hunter and Lynx aircraft will depart from New Sarum on D-Day.
7. Lynx aircraft to position Grand Reef on D-1 for deployment on D-Day.

D-Day Sequence of Events

8. 0430 - 0500 Helicopter phased departures from New Sarum to Heli Assy area.
9. 0630 - 0700 All 31 helicopters refuel at Heli Assy Area. Following to be up lifted by G Cars (Polo) to Adm Base:
23 pax (16 Army. 1 Air Force (DZ Controller), 4 SB, 2 Medics)
1 × Mortar
4400 × 20mm ammunition
7500 × .303 ammunition
Demolition Explosives
Army ammunition
10. 0600 Para Dakota departs New Sarum for tgt.
11. 0630 DC7 departs New Sarum for Adm Base (80 drums fuel).
12. 0710 10 K Cars, 10 G Cars (40 RLI) and Comd Heli departs for tgt.

13. 0741 DC3 deception aircraft overhead tgt.

14. 0745 H HOUR

2 x Hunters, 1000 lb bomb High Dive profile or Frantan profile on tgts 'H, 'M'. (Frantan profile if weather or noise problems arise). 1 x Hunter: Frantan on tgt 'L with 30mm cannon restrike capability.

4 x Vampires FB9s: RE and 20mm cannon strikes on tgt 'T'.

H + 30 secs 4 x Canberra: Mk II Frag Bombs on tgt as follows:

1 x Canberra on tgt 'H

2 x Canberra on tgt 'M', 'D' and 'C complex

1 x Canberra on tgt 'L'

H + 30 secs 4 x Hunter: 68mm RP and 30mm cannon on AA positions

to 5 mins and additional strikes on tgts J and 'B'. One pair after RP strikes to climb up and provide top cover.

H + 2 mins 6 x Dakotas paradrop 144 tps on tgt.

H + 5 mins 10 K Cars engage following tgts:

2 x K Cars on tgt area 'H

1 x K Car on tgt area 'R'

2 x K Cars on tgt area T

2 x K Cars on tgt area 'L'

1 x K Car on tgt area 'P'

2 x K Cars on tgt area B/D/M/C

(K Cars rtn Adm Base to refuel on phased/controlled basis).

10 x G Cars deploy 40 RLI on ridge to NORTH of tgt. Then proceed to Adm Base to refuel and standby for further tasks (casevac etc.). Comd G Car in area. Comd Dakota in area.

1 x Lynx on close recce and radio relay.

1 x Lynx on wide recce

H + 15 2 x Vampire Tlls take over top cover from Hunters.

15. Post Strike Requirements

a. Top cover of either Hunter or Vampire aircraft throughout sweep and recovery phase. (Recovery will extend into D + 1 commencing 240545B).

b. Bomber profile Hunters to refuel only and remain in air-to-air configuration.

- c. One pair to rearm with 68mm AP R.P for possible anti-tank role. (To be used for top cover but 68mm only to be utilised if absolutely necessary).
- d. Remaining Hunters rearm with normal 68mm or Frantan/30mm configurations.
- e. Vampires recover to New Sarum to rearm with 20mm for top cover duties.
- f. 3 x Canberras rearm with MK II and Frag bombs and remain on crew room readiness.
- g. 1 x Canberra rearm with 1000 lb bombs for possible retaliation in the event of Umtali being attacked.
- h. 6 x Dakota recover to Grand Reef and remain on standby for possible reserve troop uplift, resupply of fuel, ammo, water plus possible casevac uplift Grand Reef to Sby.
- j. 2 x Lynx positioned at Grand Reef to take-over recce role from those already airborne.

16. Admin Area (WQ 5228)

- a. H - 20 mins 10 x G Car (Polo) aircraft depart Heli Assy Area for Admin Base. Loads as follows:
 - i. 16 x RLI including Mortar Team
 - ii. 1 x 81mm Mortar and Bombs
 - iii. K Car Ammo
 - iv. Army ammo/grenades
 - v. Explosives
 - vi. 3 x SB reps
 - vii. 1 x Air Force DZ controller
 - viii. 1 x Air Force armourer
 - ix. Doctor/Medic
- b. H + 15. 10 x G Car (Polo) arrive Admin Base and mark DZ for DC7 para-drop of fuel.
- c. H + 15. DC7 Fuel drop into DZ one Km from Heli LZ. (80 drums fuel).

17. Control

- a. Overall command will be conducted from the Comd Dakota with intimate operational control being maintained by the Comd Heli. A

deputy Controller (Alfa 7) has been nominated and will assume command of the intimate operational area when necessary.

- b. Admin Base control will be maintained by the Air Force DZ controller. VHF communications are required.
- c. Heli Assy Area control will be maintained by an Air Force LZ controller. VHF communications are required.

18. Communications

- a. The communications net is shown in Army Orders sections.
- b. Call signs and frequencies will be allocated at the Air briefing.

19. Recovery

- a. The recovery of troops and eqpt will be conducted in two phases but is planned to run concurrently.
- b. Recovery of troops and parachutes from the tgt area to the Admin Base is to commence no later than 1330. A detailed flow chart is shown at [Appendix A](#)
- c. Troops, eqpt and parachute recovery from the Admin Base to the Heli Assy area will commence immediately the first wave of troops arrive at the Admin Base from the tgt area. A detailed flow chart is shown at [Appendix A](#).
- d. It is anticipated that approx 62 troops will remain in the Admin Base overnight and will be recovered by 0830 on the 24 November, 1977. This move is included in the attached flow chart.
- e. A helicopter recovery team will be positioned at the Heli Assy area and will assist in the recovery of helicopter aircraft that cannot be flown out but are worth recovery action.

20. Emergencies

- a. Helicopter emergencies will be dealt with by the Comd team in the immediate operational area.
- b. Search and rescue will be initiated immediately with the Lynx and Helicopter effort in the area. Hot extraction/rescue will also be initiated immediately with helicopter effort from the Admin Base. Wherever possible destruction of irrecoverable downed aircraft will be attempted. Other emergencies will be covered at the Air briefing and individual Squadron briefings.

21. Logistics

The following eqpt is required to be positioned at Grand Reef and to go forward to the Heli Assy area or Admin Base as indicated:

a. Ammunition 4400 x 20mm (K Car) 7500 x .303

(To go forward to Heli Assy area a.m. Wed).

b. Spares

Helicopter spares with recovery team and armourer plus veh (to move forward to Heli Assy Area a.m. Wed).

c. Fuel

i. 160 Drums to go forward to Heli Assy Area a.m. Wed.

ii. DC7 load of 80 drums to be loaded p.m. Tues for delivery by para on Admin Base a.m. Wed.

(NOTE: These drums will be written off).

22. Messing and Accommodation

a. Messing and accommodation is required at New Sarum for No. 2 Squadron personnel.

b. Helicopter crews (62 personnel) plus Dakota and Lynx crews will be required to be accommodated at Grand Reef (FAF 8) on the night of Wednesday 23rd Nov 1977

640/3/10/SIGS(EDN ALPHA)

SHACKLES/RIDDLE/AUTHENTICATION



Image



Image

APPENDIX A TO SAS VERBAL O'S

TOP SECRET PHASE 1

1. POSITIONING



Image

2. FUEL REQUIRED AT ADMIN AREA



Image

3. RECOVERY FROM TGT TO ADMIN BASE

a. 192 TROOPS

b. 144 PARACHUTES

FUEL



Image

APPENDIX A TO SAS VERBAL O's

TOP SECRET PHASE 1

4. RECOVERY FROM ADMIN TO ASSEMBLY

a. 160 Pax

b. Admin Sup Pax & EQ

c. 144 Parachutes & 80 Supp



Image

FUEL

APPENDIX G TO SAS VERBAL O'S

COMMANDS AND SIGNALS

1. OVERALL COMMAND

Comd Comops, airborne as Comops TAC HQ (DC3)

2. TACTICAL COMMAND

- a. Command Heli
 - i. Army Comd - Maj Robinson
 - ii. Air Force Comd - Gp Capt Walsh
- b. Alternate Command Heli
 - i. Army Comd - Maj Graham
 - ii. Air Force Comd - Sqn Ldr Griffiths

3. GROUND COMMAND

- a. STOP 1 - 1 RLI Comd
- b. STOP 2 - 1 RLI Comd
- c. STOP 3 - Capt Willis
- d. STOP 4 - Capt Mackenzie
- e. STOP 5 - Lt Roberts
- f. STOP 6 - Capt Wilson
- g. STOP A-J - 1 RLI Comd

4. RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

- a. VHF Nets
 - i. Battle Comd Net
 - (a) All ac, the mors at the Adm Base and STOP 1-6 and A-J will be on the Battle Comd Net freq of 132.20 Mhz, A76 code L20.
 - ii. (b) STOP 2 C/S will operate on freq 130.30 Mhz, A76 code J30.
 - (c) STOP 3 C/S will operate on freq 130.10 Mhz, A76 code J10.
 - (d) STOP 4 C/S will operate on freq 130.40 Mhz, A76 code J40.
 - (e) STOP 5 C/S will operate on freq 130.00 Mhz, A76 code J00.
 - (f) STOP 6 C/S will operate on freq 130.20 Mhz, A76 code J20.
 - (g) STOP A C/S will operate on freq 130.60 Mhz, A76 code J60.
 - (h) Mors plus the 16 RLI Prtn elm at the Adm Base will operate on freq 130.70 Mhz, A76 code J70.

- (j) Heli Assy Area, 20 1 RLI Prtn tps will operate on freq 130.80 Mhz, A76 code J80.
- (k) Should a c/s req close air sp, the c/s is to switch to the bat-de comd net freq 132.20 Mhz A76 code L20.
- (l) All ac have a dual fit and can speak to one another on their natter freq.

iii. Adm Net

- (a) The Comd Heli, Adm Base, Heli Assy Area and SAS Grand Reef will be able to switch to the Adm net freq of 130.90 Mhz, A76 code J90. All ac have the ability to switch to the freq if necessary.
- (b) The Adm base, Heli Assy area and SAS Grand Reef are also on the Army Comd Net (HF).

iv. Call Signs

- (a) Compos TAC HQ C/S 0
(DC3)
- (b) Comd Heli C/S 09 Maj Robinson
 C/S DO Gp Capt Walsh
- (c) Alt Comd Heli C/S 9A Maj Graham (if airborne)
 C/S A7 Sqn Ldr Griffiths
- (d) STOP Gps will use their Stop GP numbers as their call signs
(STOPS 1-6 and A).
- (e) STOP 1 C/S 1, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.
- (f) STOP 2 C/S 2, 21, 22, 23. 24 and 25
- (g) STOP 3 C/S 3, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 35
- (h) STOP 4 C/S 4, 41, 42, 43, 44 and 45
- (j) STOP 5 C/S 5, 51, 52, 53, 54 and 55
- (k) STOP 6 C/S 6, 61, 62, 63, 64 and 65
- (l) STOP A C/S A, B, C, D, E, F G, H, I and J
- (m) STOP B C/S 91, 91A, 91B, 91C
- (n) Mors (at Adm C/S 10
Base)

- (o) Heli Assy Area 92. This includes the Prtn party with 92A,
C/S 92B, 92C, 92D, 92E.
- (P) SAS Grd Reef 93
C/S
- (q) Normal procedures to be adopted for ground C/S to contact ac.

v. Btys

All A76 sets to hold four spare Btys.

vi. Recovery of Eqpt

This is the first time the A76 is being used externally. Every effort is to be made to recover this eqpt should it be lost.

b. HF Net

i. The Army Comd Net will be utilised and will consist of the fol:

- (a) Army HQ (control Sta) 13 NIS AY
- (b) Comops HQ 52
- (c) Comops TAC HQ (Airborne) 70
- (d) JOC REPULSE 63
- (e) JOC TANGENT 01
- (f) HQ 1 Bde Battle HQ 81
- (g) JOC HURRICANE 32
- (h) JOC THRASHER 60
- (i) 1 RLI (Rear) 12
- (k) SAS (Rear) 41
- (l) SAS (Grand Reef) 90
- (m) Adm Base 62
- (n) Heli Assy Area 83
- (o) JOC SPLINTER 71
- (P) JOC GRAPPLE 18

ii. Freq

- (a) F1 2160USB
- (b) F2 3226USB
- (c) F3 4625USB
- (d) F4 6245LSB

(e) Approx times for changing freq - on instrs from control sta.

(i) At 0630 F1 - F3

(ii) At 0830 F3 - F4

(iii) At 1800 F4 – F1

iii. Tptr

A secure tptr system will be utilised between Comops TAC HQ and Comops HQ. this will be an Air Force responsibility.

5. **ESTABLISHING COMMS**

All stations to minimise before H-Hour and join respective net as and when necessary.

6. **DOCUMENTS**

All C/S, Air Crews, Comd elements etc will be in possession of Special Button/Shackle/Riddle code. Comops TAC HQ, the Comd Heli, Alt Comd Heli, Heli Assy Area and Adm Base will be in possession of Placard and Trigram code in addition to the above.

7 **NICKNAMES**



Image

8. **RESERVES**



Image



Image



Image



Image

Appendix 3

ROLL OF HONOUR 1ST BN, THE RHODESIAN LIGHT INFANTRY KILLED IN ACTION



Image



Image

MEMBERS WHO DIED ON OPERATIONS



Image

BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE



Image

Appendix 4

CITATIONS

The author has selected seven citations of Appendix 'A' to General Order No. 1 dated 27 January 1980 for the reader's interest. The citations for the honours and awards are to seven men of the RLI, most of whom were well acquainted with the author.

Silver Cross of Rhodesia (Posthumous Award) - Major Bruce Miles Snelgar, 1st. Bn. RLI

Major Bruce Miles Snelgar was appointed Officer Commanding 3 Commando, 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry on 30th April 1978. He served continuously on operations from that date until 26th September 1979, when he died in a flying accident.

Major Snelgar ably commanded his sub-unit displaying leadership and professional skill of the highest order. During the period that Major Snelgar served as a Commando Commander, assisted by air support, his Commando eliminated over six hundred and fifty terrorists. This outstanding success rate was due largely to Major Snelgar's exceptionally accurate assessment of tactical situations, his inspiring leadership and his excellent command ability.

Over the period 5th/6th August 1978, Major Snelgar commanded a fire force operation during which thirty-one terrorists were eliminated. During this action the aircraft from which he was directing the battle came under heavy enemy fire and was forced to land. Regardless of his own safety he continued to direct operations from the ground until a replacement aircraft arrived. Again, over the period 4th/5th January 1979 in two similar operations under his command, thirty-seven terrorists were eliminated.

On 19th May 1979 as a result of a fire force contact a number of terrorists took refuge in a cave. For most of the day the ground troops tried to flush the terrorists from the cave. Three members of the Commando were wounded in this action. Major Snelgar then joined the troops at the mouth of the cave. He assessed the situation and decided to enter the cave himself, at great personal risk. On reaching the rear of the cave he sighted four terrorists crouched in a crevice and threw a grenade at them. As a direct result of Major Snelgar's action the terrorist group was eliminated.

In these and other operations as an airborne controller, Major Snelgar was continually exposed to accurate enemy fire. Despite this, he was an untiring commander who never failed to set a fine example to those under his command. His willingness to accompany his troops on the ground, his close attention to detail and calm, determined leadership were constant inspiration to his men and the main reasons for his Commando attaining a standard of morale and fighting spirit of the highest order.

Bronze Cross of Rhodesia - Temporary Corporal Peter Malcolm Binion -1st Bn. RLI

Corporal Peter Malcolm Binion has been a patrol commander with Support Commando, 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, for a period of two years. During this period, he has been involved in many contacts with the enemy and has personally accounted for numerous terrorists.

On 4th April 1979, Corporal Binion was the second-in-command of a patrol which was sweeping towards some terrorists. As the patrol approached a clump of rocks, the patrol commander was killed instantly at point-blank range by fire from two terrorists who were concealed in the rocks. Corporal Binion immediately put down covering fire himself and under covering fire from the remainder of the patrol, he manoeuvred himself into a position where he was able to kill the two terrorists at considerable danger to himself. Shortly afterwards, the patrol came under rocket fire at short range from another terrorist who was using an RPG rocket launcher. Corporal Binion received a minor shrapnel wound. Despite this he was able to close with and kill this terrorist.

On 7th April 1979 Corporal Binion was again involved in a contact in which six terrorists were killed. He personally accounted for four of these terrorists.

Throughout these and other engagements, Corporal Binion has shown remarkable courage and tenacity. His desire to close with and kill the enemy is uppermost in his mind. His standard of professional soldiering and dedication to duty are of the highest order.

Bronze Cross of Rhodesia - Sergeant Edward John Robert Kerr - 1st Bn. RLI

Sergeant Edward John Robert Kerr has been a member of 1 Commando, 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, since 24th May 1976. During this period he has been involved in numerous engagements with the enemy in

which he has shown the utmost courage, leadership and dedication to duty. His professional approach and calmness under fire are a constant example to all who serve with him. Sergeant Kerr has completed fifty-three operational parachute descents, many of them in unfavourable conditions.

On 28th February 1978 Sergeant Kerr was the leader of a section of a fire force deployed to a sighting of terrorists. During the ensuing contact his section was required to sweep a thickly covered river line through which Sergeant Kerr was forced to crawl and cut his way. The nature of the terrain precluded any form of air support. During this sweep Sergeant Kerr personally accounted for three terrorists.

On the 9th March 1979 Sergeant Kerr was deployed with his section to a sighting of approximately twenty-five terrorists. In the ensuing contact twenty-one terrorists were eliminated. During the contact four terrorists were seen by two other sections to be breaking towards Sergeant Kerr's section. The two other sections opened fire killing two of the terrorists, but in the process Sergeant Kerr's section was caught in the cross fire. Despite being in the cross fire Sergeant Kerr remained absolutely calm and, disregarding this fire, accounted for the two remaining terrorists. He then took command of the sweep line consisting of six groups and, with air support, proceeded to eliminate the remaining terrorists.

On 11th March 1979 Sergeant Kerr was deployed with his section by parachute, to a sighting of twelve terrorists. On landing in the dropping zone one member of his group broke an ankle and Sergeant Kerr was concussed and sustained a severely bruised hip and shoulders. Despite these injuries he refused to be evacuated by the helicopter. He remained with his section which moved approximately 800 metres to their stop position where they accounted for three terrorists.

Finally, on the 12th May 1979 whilst on a fire force deployment to a sighting of thirty terrorists, Sergeant Kerr had accounted for three terrorists before one member of his section was killed and he was seriously wounded.

During the period that Sergeant Kerr has served with 1 Commando the sub-unit has eliminated over six hundred terrorists. Sergeant Kerr was involved in the majority of the contacts and his courage, skill, enthusiasm and leadership have been of the highest order and an example to all.

Bronze Cross of Rhodesia - Corporal Bruce Ronald Kidd - 1st Bn. RLI

Corporal Bruce Ronald Kidd joined 3 Commando, the 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, on 18th November 1977. He has been deployed on operations almost continuously since that date. During the period May 1978 to July 1979 he was involved in twenty-five successful fire force engagements as a patrol leader. A total of two hundred and fourteen terrorists were eliminated in those contacts, a large number of whom were accounted for by Corporal Kidd and men under his command. Corporal Kidd's aggression, tactical skill, personal courage and leadership have contributed greatly to the success of these contacts.

As a senior patrol leader in 3 Commando he has, on numerous occasions, been called on to control and conduct sweep operations in fire force target areas. Throughout these operations, his gallantry and devotion to duty have been a fine example to the men under his command.

On 18th May 1979 men under his personal leadership were responsible for the elimination of six terrorists who had taken cover in a cave. Throughout his service with the 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, Corporal Kidd has displayed fine qualities of leadership often at great personal risk. His conduct on operation is worthy of high praise.

Bronze Cross of Rhodesia - Temporary Lance Corporal Rex John Arthur Harding - 1st Bn. RLI

Whilst serving as a troop non-commissioned officer and as a section commander in 1 Commando, 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, Temporary Lance Corporal Rex John Arthur Harding has displayed courage, leadership and devotion to duty.

On 27th June 1979, a group of fifteen terrorists was sighted by security forces and the fire force was deployed to investigate and contact these terrorists. During this contact Lance Corporal Harding was deployed as part of a sweep line which consisted of three patrols of men.

While advancing, this sweep line was subjected to heavy, accurate enemy fire which came from an outcrop of rocks and caves to their front. During the ensuing fire fight the Commander of the sweep line was wounded. Lance Corporal Harding immediately took command of the sweep line and supervised the successful evacuation of the wounded man. He then regrouped the sweep line and continued with the sweep operation.

On two occasions during the sweep Lance Corporal Harding deliberately exposed himself to enemy fire in order to exercise better

control over the members of the sweep line. By so doing, Lance Corporal Harding was able to capture the enemy position which was occupied by six terrorists. All six terrorists were eliminated due mainly to the outstanding bravery, tactical skill and leadership displayed by Lance Corporal Harding. His actions were above and beyond the call of duty and are deserving of recognition.

Bronze Cross of Rhodesia - Temporary Lance Corporal Andrew Robert Gibson - 1st Bn. RLI

On 10th June 1979 Temporary Lance Corporal Andrew Robert Gibson was a patrol leader in a fire force manned by 3 Commando, the 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, which was deployed to a sighting of approximately thirty terrorists. In the ensuing engagement Lance Corporal Gibson's patrol was moved to the left flank of a sweep line which was sweeping the target area. Elements of his sweep line came under heavy, effective small arms fire from a well-concealed enemy position.

In the initial burst of enemy fire, one security force member was killed and two others wounded, including the sweep line commander. Lance Corporal Gibson moved across from the left flank to the centre of the sweep line to render first aid to the wounded men, and to take over command of the sweep operation.

He arranged for the sweep line to withdraw and for the wounded men to be evacuated by helicopter. Throughout this period Lance Corporal Gibson was subjected to a steady rate of fire from the enemy. After the casualties had been evacuated Lance Corporal Gibson re-organised the sweep line and advanced again to engage the enemy. A total of twenty-one terrorists were accounted for in this engagement.

Lance Corporal Gibson's courageous action under fire almost certainly saved two wounded men's lives. He has continuously shown great courage, leadership and initiative on operations. He has set an outstanding example to his men and is a credit to his unit and to the Army.

Bronze Cross of Rhodesia - Trooper Ian Robert Traynor - 1st Bn. RLI

Trooper Ian Robert Traynor has been a machine gunner in Support Commando, 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, since 10th January 1977. Since that date, Trooper Traynor has been involved in more than forty contacts with the enemy.

As a machine gunner. Trooper Traynor has shown himself to be an exceptionally professional soldier. His coolness under heavy fire, his quick reactions coupled with accurate shooting have, in many cases, undoubtedly saved the lives of members of his patrol.

In one case, during December 1978, Trooper Traynor's patrol was pinned down in the open from an enemy machine gunner whose exact position was uncertain. Despite being personally subjected to heavy fire, Trooper Traynor moved into a position where he was able to locate the terrorist machine gunner who was in fact concealed in a mango tree. Trooper Traynor then shot and killed the terrorist. Shortly afterwards, a further terrorist broke cover at a range of approximately two hundred and fifty metres from Trooper Traynor. He killed this terrorist with a short burst from his machine gun. In this, and other contacts, Trooper Traynor has personally killed over thirty terrorists.

In all the actions in which Trooper Traynor has been involved, his personal conduct has been most professional. His coolness under fire and his determination to do with and eliminate the enemy has been an inspiration to all who serve with him.

GLOSSARY

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>A Luta Continua!</i> | ‘The Struggle Continues’ - revolutionary slogan (Portuguese). |
| AD | accidental discharge (of a weapon). |
| ASP/ASAP | as soon as possible. |
| AWOL | absent without leave. |
| BCR | Bronze Cross of Rhodesia. |
| <i>Bamba Zonke</i> | ‘Takes all’ (Shona) - nickname for Salisbury. |
| bivvy | bivouac. |
| Blue Job | an airman (English slang). |
| bombshell | to scatter. |
| Brown Job | a soldier (English slang). |
| BSAP | British South Africa Police - the Rhodesian Police. |
| casevac | casualty evacuation. |
| CB | confined to barracks. |
| Charlie Tango | ‘radio speak’ for Communist terrorist. |
| chopper | helicopter. |
| Claymore | anti-personnel mine. |
| ComOps | Combined Operations - the supreme military council. |
| CQ | Commando or Company Quartermaster. |
| crow | girl (Rhodesian slang). |
| CSM | Commando (or Company) Sergeant Major. |
| CT | Communist terrorist - also ‘Charlie Tango’. |
| DA | District Assistant. |
| DB | Detention Barracks. |

| | |
|---------------|--|
| <i>dagga</i> | marijuana (Afrikaans) - also 'grass' or 'dope'. Also 'earth' or 'soil' as in 'pole and dagga' hut (Shona). |
| <i>dinoda</i> | 'give me' or 'I want' (Shona). |
| dixie | cooking pot with collapsible handle. |
| dog biscuits | plain ration biscuits. |
| <i>dop</i> | beer (Afrikaans). |
| dope | marijuana, grass, <i>dagga</i> . |
| <i>donga</i> | ditch (South African). |
| doss | sleep (Rhodesian slang). |
| DZ | drop zone. |
| <i>ek sê</i> | 'I say' (Afrikaans) pronounced 'ek say'. |
| <i>enda</i> | 'go' (Shona). |
| FAF | Forward Air Field. |
| Freds | FRELIMO troops (Rhodesian slang). |
| frag | fragmentation grenade. |
| fran/frantan | euphemism for napalm. |
| FRELIMO | Front for the Liberation of Moçambique. |
| fresh | new recruits (Rhodesian slang - Afrikaans der.). |
| puss/poes | |
| G-car | Alouette troop-carrying helicopter. |
| gapped it | left in a hurry (Rhodesian slang). |
| goffle/goffel | a Coloured - a person of mixed blood (Rhodesian slang). |
| <i>gomo</i> | hill or mountain (Shona). |
| gook | guerrilla (American slang from Vietnam). |
| gonk | to sleep (Rhodesian slang). |
| grass | marijuana. |
| graze | to eat (v) or food (n) (Rhodesian slang). |
| gungy | dirty, filthy (Rhodesian slang). |

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| HE | high explosive. |
| hot-extraction harness | a seating apparatus, suspended from a helicopter by a long rope, used to extract troops from dense bush when no LZ is available. |
| Hooterville | School of Infantry, Gwelo - also 'Hooters' (Rhodesian slang). |
| int | intelligence. |
| Intaf | Internal Affairs - Department of. |
| IO | Intelligence Officer. |
| <i>ja</i> | yes (Afrikaans). |
| <i>jol</i> | to go, to party (pronounced - 'jawl/jorl' - Afrikaans). |
| JOC | Joint Operational Command. |
| jungle lane | a training exercise in which a soldier walks down a path and shoots at pre-arranged, concealed targets. |
| K-car | 'Killer Car' - Alouette gunship. |
| <i>kachasu</i> | illicit, often highly poisonous (sometimes fatal) Shona beer. |
| kaffir | unbeliever (Arabic) now used derogatively. |
| <i>kak</i> | bullshit/shit (pronounced - 'cuck' - Afrikaans). |
| kays | kilometres. |
| <i>kopje/koppie</i> | small hill (Afrikaans). |
| <i>kraal</i> | village (South African). |
| <i>lekker</i> | nice, super (Afrikaans). |
| lemon | aborted operation, waste of time (Rhodesian slang). |
| loc | position, location. |
| locstat | positional coordinates. |
| LZ | landing zone. |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>Matabele</i> | inhabitants of southern and western parts of Rhodesia. |
| mealie | maize or com cob. |
| MFC | Military Forces Commendation. |
| <i>mopani</i> | large hardwood tree, indigenous to Rhodesia. |
| MP | military police. |
| <i>mushe/moosh</i> | nice, good (Shona). |
| <i>msasa</i> | attractive leafy tree, indigenous to Rhodesia. |
| MT | motor transport. |
| <i>mujiba</i> | civilian youth running with guerrillas (Shona). |
| <i>muwanga</i> | tall, shady hardwood tree, indigenous to Rhodesia. |
| <i>munt</i> | tribesman (from the Shona <i>muntu</i> - a man). |
| nanny | African female (derogatory Rhodesian slang). |
| nasho | derogatory term for a national serviceman (English slang). |
| NCO | non-commissioned officer. |
| NS | national service/serviceman. |
| OC | Officer Commanding. |
| <i>ouen/oke</i> | boy, lad, fellow, 'mate' (Afrikaans). |
| OP | observation post. |
| PATU | Police Anti-Terrorist Unit. |
| PJI | Parachute Jump Instructor. |
| pokey drill | PT with rifles. |
| possy | position (pronounced 'pozzy' - Rhodesian slang). |
| <i>povo</i> | the peasants, the people (Shona). |
| <i>praat</i> | to talk (Afrikaans). |
| PTS | Parachute Training School. |
| QM | Quarter Master. |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| rat pack | ration pack. |
| R and R | rest and recreation. |
| RAF | Rhodesian Air Force. |
| RAR | Rhodesian African Rifles. |
| RBC | Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation. |
| RLI | Rhodesian Light Infantry |
| RP | Regimental Police. |
| RR | Rhodesia Regiment (Territorials). |
| RSM | Regimental Sergeant Major. |
| RSO | Regimental Signals Officer. |
| RV | rendezvous. |
| RWS | Rhodesian Women's Service. |
| | |
| SAP | South African Police. |
| SAS | Special Air Service. |
| SB | Special Branch (of Rhodesian Police or BSAP). |
| SCR | Silver Cross of Rhodesia. |
| scene | contact (with enemy) or military operation (Rhodesian slang). |
| scheme | think, reckon (Rhodesian slang). |
| SF | Security Forces. |
| <i>shamwari</i> | friend (Shona). |
| shell scrape | a shallow trench. |
| shebeen | a place where alcohol is obtained illegally - an informal pub. |
| <i>Shona</i> | the largest tribal group in Rhodesia. |
| sitrep | situation report. |
| skate | rogue, thug, bounder, (Rhodesian slang). |
| skive | shirk or run off/away. |
| SNEB | white phosphorus air-to-ground rockets. |
| snotty/snot-squirt | fusillade of bullets (Rhodesian slang). |
| SOP | standard operational procedure. |

| | |
|------------------|--|
| <i>spruit</i> | gully (Afrikaans). |
| stop | marijuana (Rhodesian slang). |
| Stop | callsign, stop group, stick. |
| subbie | subaltern. |
| sunray | VP for commander. |
| terr | or ‘ter’, terrorist (Rhodesian slang). |
| TF | Territorial Force. |
| trupp | walk, trek (Afrikaans ‘trap’ - to tread). |
| TTL | Tribal Trust Land. |
| tune | tell, talk to (Rhodesian slang). |
| two-five | Unimog. |
| Unimog | 2.5-tonne Mercedes 4 × 4 truck. |
| <i>vakomwana</i> | boys, lads (Shona term often applied to the guerrillas i.e. ‘the boys in the bush’). |
| <i>veldskoen</i> | sturdy suede-leather bush shoe (Afrikaans). |
| <i>vlei</i> | marshy, low lying area (Afrikaans). |
| VP | radio voice procedure. |
| WO | Warrant Officer. |
| WVS | Women’s Volunteer Service. |
| ZANU | Zimbabwe African National Union. |
| ZANLA | ZANU’s military wing, Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army. |
| ZAPU | Zimbabwe African People’s Union. |
| ZIPRA | ZAPU’s military wing, Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army. |

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